

les améthystes du ciel | neuvillette

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/51166537) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/51166537>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)
Relationships:	Neuvillette (Genshin Impact)/Reader , Neuvillette (Genshin Impact) & Reader , Neuvillette (Genshin Impact)/You , Neuvillette (Genshin Impact) & You
Characters:	Neuvillette (Genshin Impact) , Wriothesley (Genshin Impact) , Clorinde (Genshin Impact) , Furina (Genshin Impact) , Lyney (Genshin Impact) , Lynette (Genshin Impact) , Freminet (Genshin Impact) , Sigewinne (Genshin Impact) , Melusine Characters (Genshin Impact)
Additional Tags:	this is sfw , No Smut , honestly you're a brave one attempting to read this load of rot , How Do I Tag , idk how to tag anyways , uh check out my tumblr for frequent updates on this fic if you want , Minor canon divergence , lots of flirting and banter
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-10-28 Updated: 2024-02-16 Words: 76,395 Chapters: 15/?

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by [jqnehr](#)

Summary

two people under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

[neuvillette x female!reader]

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— bal du mercredi soir

I could be anywhere else. The flute of champagne clutched in your hand is more than three quarters empty, and if you don't get a refill of the succulent, bubbly liquid courage soon, you're afraid you'd combust. You'd been dragged here by your beloved, dear friend Navia, under her insistence of finding a potential love prospect for you. She says you're growing old, that you'll die alone if you don't get your act together and settle down.

You sigh into your glass, watching the waltzing Navia with a slightly arched brow. *Seems like she's not exactly strapped for potential love interests.* Navia's beauty is no joke; with her luscious, wavy blonde hair cascading out behind her as she's swept across the ballroom by a handsome young nobleman; sparkling blue eyes and an enticing smile. He seems enamoured, while Navia smiles politely, humouring the fellow. You immediately feel sorry for him—he, in no way, has a chance with dearest Navia, the one with many grovelling at her feet, while she is too much in love with keeping the Spina di Rosula afloat. Considering her persistence on *you* finding a dancing partner, she seems to be having a more worthwhile time. You love Navia, and you much prefer how she garners all the attention compared to you. You are comfortable with remaining as her shadow.

You are an average-looking woman, nothing remarkable at all. Once, you were insecure about it, burning with envy for those young girls who were blessed and revered for their sheer beauty. However, the more you observed how they were treated with such empty, shallow praises and compliments, where the men only want one thing, you began to consider yourself fortunate. Where such women are only considered nothing more than trophies—lovely decorations to bring around on display for others to see and envy the man over. You, as a plain-looking person with a fairly mundane personality to match, something you've carefully curated to steer clear of such people, has proven successful in keeping you safe from the clutches of controlling men.

However, it also deterred those you found yourself fond of, regardless of gender. Men you once found yourself falling for, only to learn of their indifference for you. Women you were eager to befriend, but your interests contradicted theirs, your opinions opposed theirs, and your frankness left them disconcerted. You are extremely appreciative of Navia, and how she has not deserted you, yet.

You're content with being left alone at present. Not one man has approached you for a dance once—thanks to the resting bitch face you'd decided to don for the evening, specifically selected to keep them far away from you. The champagne, the canelés, the conch madeleines and éclairs all set out neatly upon the banquet table is company enough for you.

Tonight, however, is one that many scrambled to attend—for none other than the Chief Justice of Fontaine, the well-respected Iudex, has graced the ballroom with his presence. It is once in a blue moon for someone as reserved and stern as him to appear at such an event. You've occasionally spotted his silvery hair and those curious blue ornaments that seem to almost glow with the very essence of the sea itself, flowing down his back, wandering about the room. As usual, his regalia is tasteful, pristine and of that deep shade of blue he seems to

enjoy wearing—and for good measure, too; it suits him almost too well. The Duke of Meropide is also in attendance this evening, along with the champion duelist Clorinde, and as you’ve scanned the ballroom, just quietly people-watching, you’ve spotted the three conversing, at ease around one another like old friends. However, not once has the Chief Justice danced. You suppose he’s just not one for the dance floor, which you cannot blame him for.

The whispers of other people seem to disagree—many speculate he, ever impartial, thinks himself too good to dance with such lowly humans as everyone else milling around. You shake your head at their words to yourself; while the Iudex has a certain presence about him—one of sheer authority and slight overbearing—you’ve never taken him to be arrogant. Observing is what you do best, and from his exalted seat in the Opera Epiclese to now, here, in the ballroom, reduced to an equal with everyone else, you can tell he is a stoic man, impeccably living up to his reputable impartiality, but modest.

That, and he is just as breathtaking as he is known to be. Beside the rugged, roguish good looks of the Duke, and the cold beauty of Miss Clorinde, he shines—as he always does. Here, seems more relaxed, his smiles small but easy, that chillingly impassive expression he always has upon his flawless face within the courthouse almost traceless.

You watch him nod to something the Duke of Meropide says, before averting your gaze back to Navia. *Ah, the dance is ending—finally*. The orchestra ends the piece on a breezy decrescendo, composed of a flowing pentatonic scale. With one last curtsy, Navia allows the man to escort her off the dance floor, and she immediately makes her way over to you.

You already have a second, filled flute of champagne in hand, and she beams, wiping a droplet of sweat from her upper lip. “I can never not rely on you, can I?” She takes it from you and practically guzzles the entire thing in one gulp. “Oof, that’s just what I needed.”

You grin and shake your head, placing your own empty flute upon a small table nearby. Two glasses is more than enough for one night, but you have a premonition that Navia intends to get wasted. Grabbing her arm, you drag her far away from the waiter making his rounds about the room, tray laden with more champagne-filled glasses upon it, off for the banquet table. “You looked like you enjoyed yourself out there.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Navia stares with eager blue eyes at the selection of *pain au chocolat* s on display. “He was a good dancer.” Then she fixes her crystalline gaze on you, her thoughts clear. *Oh no, here we go*. “It’s really exhilarating when you’re with the right person. Why haven’t you danced yet?”

You give her a deadpan look. “Because no one has asked me, thankfully. I’m no dancer. I’d rather be left alone.”

Navia rolls her eyes. “You’re like an old woman at times, you know?” She shakes her head, finishing off her *pain au chocolat* and popping a *chouquette* in her mouth immediately after. You say nothing in return, already resolved to just let her vent about *your* love life, and how unexciting it is—as if she doesn’t have one, either. “I’m sure the right person is somewhere around here...” Navia scans the ballroom, before her eyes rest upon the Chief Justice’s broad back. Your heart drops to your stomach—you distinctly remember how she is acquainted

with the Iudex, and her screaming match with him about her father (it was more one-sided on her part) and how the Traveller was present. As far as you knew, they'd made amends, and are now on good terms. *But they're not close enough for her to impose and introduce me!* Navia, don't be so reckless!

She is not privy to your thoughts and internal panic, however, and grabs your hand, dragging you off in his direction. "Neuvillette hasn't danced once tonight, and neither have you. Don't you think it's perfect?"

"No, I don't." You try to stop and tug your wrist from her grasp, but she is unrelenting. "Navia, don't be a fool! He would not appreciate—"

"Monsieur Neuvillette!" Navia ignores your protests and, before you know it, you're both before the three most important figures in the Region of Hydro. The infamous warden of the dreaded Fortress of Meropide, the undefeated duelist of the Court of Fontaine, and the very image of justice himself—Iudex Neuvillette. "What a pleasure to see you here! I trust your evening has been enjoyable?"

The three pause in their conversation and turn to Navia. Neuvillette politely bows his head in greeting. "Good evening, Miss Navia, and the pleasure is all mine. Thank you, this evening has been quite lively." His amethyst gaze sweeps to you, and you quickly curtsy. "Greetings, Monsieur Neuvillette."

"To what do I owe the honour?" His voice is quiet, a vast difference to his usual commanding tone within the Opera Epiclese. Out of etiquette, he takes your hands and presses a chaste kiss to it, featherlight. You blink, heat creeping up your neck. *My, he's such a gentleman!* Straightening, Neuvillette offers a polite smile. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mademoiselle...?"

"[Name]," you respond, curtseying once more. "And, no, the honour is mine, Monsieur. It is such a pleasant surprise to see you in attendance tonight."

He chuckles, low and smoothly, the sound a treat to the ears. You suddenly find it hard to hold his gaze. "Yes, I must say I, too, am surprised at myself for coming along. However, our dearest Archon would not stop insisting."

You laugh politely, before curtseying to the warden. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance also, Your Grace."

The Duke, Wriothesley, grins in reply, also taking your hand to place a gentlemanly kiss to it. You are taken aback—this man, with visible scars all across his forearms, neck and even one under his left eye, is expressing such masterful etiquette in an environment he rarely frequents. He seems utterly at ease, almost insouciant, and such a presence about him makes you find yourself also feel relaxed. A likeable young fellow, you thought, taking in his friendly smile and stately wear. Although mostly composed of dark undertones, it suits his character much. And while Neuvillette's smiles are minimal, Wriothesley's wide grins flash easily, regularly, displaying those pearly whites of his. No wonder many of the young women throughout the ballroom tended to hover around him and ogle him almost shamelessly. "No, it's all mine. And please, just call me Wriothesley."

Finally, you greet Clorinde, whose stoic expression is unwavering as you both shake hands in a polite gesture. “A pleasure to meet you, Mademoiselle Clorinde.”

“Likewise,” is her curt reply. You don’t take it personally; Clorinde is known to be cold—inscrutable. Even when she was conversing with the Chief Justice and Duke, you didn’t see her smile or laugh once.

“I’ve noticed that neither of you gentlemen have danced once this evening,” Navia quips—and you notice her adopting that charming smile of hers that always enchants the male gender. “Got cold feet?”

“Cold feet?” Wriothlesley inclines his head towards her in a *you-think-you’re-funny?* gesture, his grin wider than ever. “I just haven’t gotten around to it yet. The conversation we were having was quite riveting.”

Navia smiles, almost knowingly, hands on her hips. “Well, our apologies for disturbing you, but my friend here has gone all night long without danci—”

“Alright, Navia, no need to press any of the gentlemen here.” You sharply speak up, fixing her with a stern look. “I’m quite content without dancing. I’m no connoisseur in such respective, novel areas.”

“What a coincidence!” Wriothlesley seems delighted at your words. He claps a hand on Neuville’s shoulder, who glances at him with an unimpressed expression. “Our Chief Justice hasn’t danced tonight either. I’m sure he’d be happy to escort you.”

“*Wriothlesley.*” Neuville’s tone has lost all its previous warmth, replaced with an inflection of vexation and severity. *By the sound of it and Wriothlesley’s expression...* you observe the said man’s grinning face and twinkling eyes, and Neuville’s cold stare, *this is not an uncommon occurrence*.

“Please, Monsieur, do not feel obligated to indulge me.” You send Wriothlesley a stern look of your own, to which he quirks a brow at, before offering an apologetic smile to the Iudex. “There is no need.”

Neuville quietens, turning to stare at you with solemn amaranth hues. You’re surprised by the pure gravity within his sombre gaze; however, your expression is kept carefully pinched, unreadable. “Well, I...believe it would be terribly rude to deny a lady a dance, so, would you do me the honour?”

Navia and Wriothlesley both gape in shock, before an overjoyed expression befalls her face, and Wriothlesley looks triumphant. Clorinde’s brows are lifted, pleasantly surprised, while you stand there, blinking at the *Chief Justice’s* outstretched, gloved hand. The look on his face is almost beseeching, and, feeling somewhat regretful (however, you have no idea why), you place your smaller hand into his. “I would be delighted, Monsieur Neuville.”

The timing is impeccable—for, at that moment, more couples file onto the dance floor, and a waltz starts up once more. Allowing the Iudex of Fontaine to lead you onto the dance floor,

you do your best to ignore the blatant, wide stares, dropped jaws and excited whispers filtering about the room. *Oh, this is gonna be all over the tabloids tomorrow.*

Taking up your positions, you register the feeling of his hand on the curve of your waist, painfully accentuated due to the corset, and your interlocked hands off to the side. His hold is terribly gentle and polite, as to not impose on your personal space too much. You offer him a weak, but appreciative smile.

All eyes are on the two of you. Your nerves are buzzing; what if you mess up? What if you disappoint the Chief Justice? Would he put you on trial? *What if that happens again?*

“Relax.” Your head snaps up to look into the firm gaze of Neuville. His voice is a soft breath, only audible to the two of you. “You will be fine.”

You force out a choked, quiet laugh. “My apologies, Your Honour. The last time I danced, I sprained my ankle in front of three hundred attendees.”

“Oh?” You see a hint of a smile on his full mouth; however, it is not unkind. “You needn’t worry; I will not let you trip.”

Finally, the beats of the music signal the beginning of the dance and, with a light nod, Neuville starts to lead you across the dance floor.

He is an exceptional dancer—every movement is smooth, flowing, natural; as if he were gliding through water. He guides you along, setting a pace where you’re easily in time with his steps; his hold gentle, but unrelenting.

Neuville is the embodiment, the *picture*, of elegance; upon that eminent seat in the Opera Epiclese, he *is* justice, he is authority, he is the *law*—and here, now, he is a gentleman that has pleasantly surprised you with a kind gaze and a somewhat wistful smile.

Your dress swishes out around you as the Iudex lets go of your waist and allows you to twirl, before you settle into his warm embrace once again. The stares of the people around fades into the background, the music becomes white noise, and you find yourself unable to break gazes with the Chief Justice.

One, two, three... Your bodies move in sync, contemporised in perfect rhythm to the music, the mellifluous euphony of the accompanying melodies guiding you both along with tender hands.

His pupils are slitted, you notice, their hue a striking periwinkle. Long lashes rim his eyes, and you are surprised to see what looks like light-blue eyeliner adorning the outer edge of his eyes. It only serves to further emphasise the unadulterated intensity of his peculiar, mauve hues.

My, he really is handsome... You internally find it surprising how this man has remained so abstinent all his long life. It is no secret that the Chief Justice has remained chained to his role for hundreds of years, and all that time, he has been so notoriously reclusive, reserved,

private. Then a thought hits you—*am I the only one who's ever been this...close to the Iudex before?*

“For someone who does not attend balls often,” you say softly, opting to make light conversation. “You are an outstanding dancer.”

You notice how he inclines his head closer to you, to hear your words and answer just as quietly without garnering any unwanted attention from those around. The innocent gesture makes your heart stutter. *Goddammit, if I knew this would happen, I never would've come tonight!* You know this feeling all too well—something so foolish, so childish, something you're so infuriatingly susceptible to just because he's the first man in a long time to treat you as an equal—as a woman.

“Thank you,” he gingerly replies, leading you both into a spin, advancing smoothly across the floor, past the other couples waltzing away. “You do not give yourself enough credit, however—I believe many others here do not truly know what they're missing out on with you as a partner.”

You lower your gaze, trying to bite back a shy smile. Despite yourself, you feel your ears flush. “Please, Monsieur, you needn't shower me with such...*diplomatic* flattery, really.”

“‘Flattery’?” Neuville's brows lift in slight surprise. “On the contrary. They do say dancing is such an enjoyable experience with the right person.”

He's just being polite, don't overthink it. You press your lips together, drawn out into a thin line, before you force them into an unassuming smile. “Navia said something similar—that it's ‘exhilarating’.” You both happen to brush past the three familiar faces watching you two, at that moment, with smug smiles spread across their faces—particularly Wriothesley and Navia. Clorinde is stoic as usual, but an approving gleam shines within her cold purple eyes. “I believe I understand what she means now.”

Unbeknownst to you, as your back then turns to the trio on the sidelines, Neuville's eyes fix on Wriothesley with a stony look at the predicament the rascal of a Duke has pushed him into—but, to his own, unexpected surprise, he is not dreading it as much as he thought he would. Wriothesley's smirk widens at the look—a glint in his own steely blue eyes saying, *See? I told you.* And, at your words, Neuville finds himself agreeing.

“Yes.” Once more, he releases your waist, keeping his hand within your left one as you step from him and twirl, skirts flaring out around you; akin to a lotus flower's petals unfurling and reaching for the sky. As quickly as it came, you step back into him and he encircles a solid arm about your waist once again. Your cheeks are flushed with the exertion. “I was wise to attend tonight.”

You laugh lowly. “This little ordeal our dear Duke has shoved us into will be all the rage tomorrow. Who knows? It might even reach all the way to Inazuma.”

“Ah, yes, quite so.” Neuville huffs a small sigh, as if already fatigued at the thought of it. “However, this has proved worthwhile.”

“Oh?” You blink up at him, right into those intense amethyst eyes, now a bit afraid that you’ll collapse from the heart attack he’s starting to give you. “You’re the first person to ever even *insinuate* that I am ‘worthwhile’ company.”

The Iudex tilts his head slightly, gaze intent, as if perplexed by a curious riddle. “Truly? How outlandish. I’ll never understand how prone to misjudgement humans are.”

“Monsieur Neuville, you certainly have a way with words.” *Keep this up and you’ll send me down the rabbit hole!* “Have you considered taking your clear affinity for poetry and putting it on paper?”

Neuville chuckled, a low and almost sultry sound that made heat creep up your neck. “How amusing. You say I should write poetry? Just because I am stating the obvious? Thank you for the suggestion, Mademoiselle [Name].”

“I’m glad my first impression has been satisfactory, Monsieur Neuville,” you say in a joking tone, but, inside, you truly are pleased you’ve *finally* shed yourself in a good light to someone—and to think it is the *Chief Justice of Fontaine* in question. “That is a rarity, worth its weight in gold, for me.”

Neuville smiles genuinely—one that’s not his usual closed-mouth, polite smile that is almost infinitesimal—but one that flashes you with his pearly whites. The edges of his eyes crinkle up, and his mauve hues twinkle. Your breath hitches, and you’re suddenly *very* thankful that he’s holding you up. You’d have melted into a right puddle if that wasn’t the case. “Something I believe you must see more of, Miss [Name]. I know the Melusines would adore you.”

“Goodness, Monsieur Neuville.” You can’t fight back the blush this time. “You’re such a romantic.”

“I am?” He sounds legitimately surprised. “That’s a first. Either way, I believe in my judgement of character, and I understand that you mean well.”

You bite down on the inside of your bottom lip and drop your stare from him. *You are... sorely mistaken*. But you make no move to correct him. You tell yourself nothing matters except the present—and, like your mother used to say when discussing her shady dealings in the Fleuve Cendre about her clients: *What they don’t know can’t hurt them*.

After three long, breathless minutes, the orchestra finally brings the song to a close, and you both step back one another; the Chief Justice lowering into a bow with his right hand upon his left breast, and you dipping into a deep, polite curtsy right upon the ending note of an E flat.

Taking his arm once more, Neuville escorted you off of the dance floor, people parting the way for the both of you like Moses for the Red Sea. They stare, they whisper—but you pointedly ignore their attention. Neuville seems unbothered; considering how he is *the* most influential man within Fontaine, and the most eligible bachelor, the Iudex is likely fully used to such scrutiny from the populace.

The both of you make your way back to the trio standing nearby, and Navia wastes no time in smothering you. “My goodness! Do you *know* how breathtaking you two were?!”

“Quite.” The Duke grins, crossing his arms. “No need to thank me.” He sneaks a sly look Neuville’s way. “I’m sure it’s proven fairly...*beneficial* to either party.”

“What does that mean?” Your brows furrow slightly at his peculiar wording. *I can’t help but get a sense of foreboding from his words.*

“Ahem. He *means*,” Neuville cuts in before Wriothesley can say anymore, shooting the Duke a scathing look. *Goodness, he knows how to be intimidating!* However, Wriothesley seems utterly unruffled. “That it was a pleasant dance, and the night will continue on peacefully for all of us.”

Wriothesley’s smirk is almost lazy, before he turns and plucks a flute of champagne off of a tray the nearby waiter was carrying around. “Yes, of course. Most certainly. Whatever you say.”

“Ignore him.” Clorinde surprises everyone by finally speaking up, snatching the champagne from his hand, of which he had not taken a sip from yet. He exclaims in protest, but Clorinde downs it in reply. “He’s an idiot.”

Wriothesley huffs at her, before giving up. “Maybe I just did you both a favour.” Then he pins Neuville with a steely look. “Maybe I just got Furina off your back.”

Neuville squeezes his eyes shut, shakes his head and sighs wearily just as you open your mouth to question what he meant, before clicking it shut in resignation. You’ve just met Wriothesley, but you know enough about him already to see just how conniving of a fellow he really is.

“Anyway!” Trust Navia to diffuse the tense atmosphere. She beams her signature stellar smile. “I’m just having a *ball* here—no pun intended.”

You bite back a laugh. “Will you dance again? There are just so many eligible young noblemen just dying to waltz you away into the moonlight.”

Navia scrunches her nose in repel to the suggestion. “*Non, merci, mon amie.* I’m quite fine single. *You*, on the other hand...”

“I think she’s had a *little* bit too much to drink.” You immediately shut that route of conversation off by grabbing her arm and turning her around, intent to lead her away, giving the other three a somewhat inept smile. “She always starts to spout nonsense when the champagne *really* gets into her system.

“What the? I do *not*—” You deftly pick up a conch madeleine off a nearby tray and shove it into her mouth, cutting her off. “Let’s head off before you embarrass yourself, Navia dear.” *And before you can humiliate me any further.*

“Ah, yes, I see what you mean.” Neuvillette nods solemnly at you and your friend, who has no choice but to chew and swallow the dessert before speaking up again. You know she is not *so* mad as to speak with her mouth full—particularly when in the presence of the three most influential individuals in the Nation of Justice. He bows his head in a polite gesture. “I bid you both farewell and a pleasant remainder of your evening. It was a delight meeting you, Mademoiselle [Name].”

“It sure was,” Wriothlesley agrees, mirroring Neuvillette’s actions out of etiquette. That playful, plotting gleam in his eyes has not wavered once as he regards the dynamic between the Chief Justice and you. You can’t help but feel a bit wary with him around. Neuvillette’s uncertain glances at the Duke tell you he feels the same. “We’ll see you around.”

“Aha, *bien sûr*.” Navia’s determined blue glare is your final cue to leave before she escalates the situation into something it shouldn’t become. With one last, half-curtsy, you are quick to make yourselves scarce. “*Bonne nuit !*”

The three watch the two young women rush off before Wriothlesley turns to Neuvillette. “Well?”

“*Well?*” He repeats, lifting his chin in a gesture of superiority. Neuvillette is not one who takes kindly to using his status as leeway upon others—especially those he considers friends—but he feels insulted by the Duke’s behaviour tonight, and believes there is no other choice in showing Wriothlesley his place. “Are you so bored, you’re trying to play matchmaker in *my* life now, Wriothlesley?”

Wriothlesley appears utterly unbothered by Neuvillette’s display of dominance and his almost murderous glare. “*Matchmaker?* You wound me, Neuvillette. I’m merely trying to assist you in getting our dearest Archon off your back about this whole marriage thing. Couldn’t you see how [Name] was also in the same predicament? And it’s not like you didn’t enjoy her company.”

“She is a nice girl.” Neuvillette agrees, but does not bother giving the Duke the benefit of the doubt. “Nevertheless, she made it quite clear how she has no intention of involving herself in a relationship. Neither do I.”

Clorinde then grows tired of the conversation and excuses herself, leaving the Duke and the Iudex to continue their talk in peace. Wriothlesley lets his cheery façade fall and grows serious. “Neuvillette, this is not a matter of *intention*, per se—it is a matter of *necessity*. You *need* to marry. What better candidate is there than a young, disinterested woman who will demand nothing of you—not love, not attention, none of that frivolous stuff—and will leave you alone? You’re not looking for a paramour, you’re looking for a wife who will keep her life separate from yours, and as will you.”

“You’re missing the point, Wriothlesley,” Neuvillette sighs wearily. “Furina wants me to, and I quote, ‘Discover and explore the wonderful world of romance, to find someone to finally rely on and trust. To osculate under the beaming summer sun, to share desserts with as one’.” The Iudex cannot help but grimace at the Hydro Archon’s words as he recalls them.

Wriothlesley, too, visibly cringes at her characteristic, over-the-top extravagance and embellished rhyming.

He soon recovers, biting back his laughter. “So...what do you think’s brought her sudden fixation of your nonexistent love life on?”

“Novels.” Neuvillette responds grimly. “She’s filled her head up with that drivel they call literature from Yae Publishing House.” All the Chief Justice wants now is a sizable glass of Sumeruian spring water. Alas, he forces himself to remain within the moment and fret over yet another burdensome problem Foçalors has dumped on his shoulders. “I’m considering outlawing the store.”

“She’d trash your office with a tantrum at that.” Wriothlesley snorts, shaking his head in humourless amusement. “No, I think it’s best if you just let her have her way. Or, maybe go into a temporary, contractual marriage until her monomania about your love life fades.”

Neuvillette falls into a thoughtful silence at the Duke’s words, contemplating. *It’s...plausible*, he thinks, hand on his chin. “...Your suggestion has merit.”

“Of course it does,” Wriothlesley scoffs, giving his superior an *and-you-just-noticed?* look. “It sounds like dear Mademoiselle [Name] is in dire need of a solution and escape from her friend’s...marriage broker ways.”

Neuvillette gives Wriothlesley a lengthy sidelong look, unimpressed. “Like yourself? And Furina? Yes, I can empathise with her greatly.”

“Aha! Sarcasm!” Wriothlesley hollers, turning heads all around. Clearing his throat, he nods an apology to the onlookers for his abrupt loudness. Lowering his voice, he continues, eyes sparkling, “I finally got a rise out of the Chief Justice of Fontaine! Hooray for me!”

Neuvillette sighs heavily through his nose at the Duke’s typical antics. “You’re tipsy, aren’t you? Good thing Clorinde did not allow you to have that last glass of champagne.”

“Oh, get off it.” Wriothlesley waves a dismissive hand at Neuvillette’s criticism, his grin derisive. “I’m just as sober as Navia was when [Name] chased her off.” The Duke shoves his hands into his pockets, pose languid. “You both knew what was coming, knew where the conversation was going, and she chose that ideal moment to run away. And if I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re quite taken with the young lady.”

“There is a prominent difference between being ‘quite taken’ and seeing another in a respectful light.” Neuvillette looks at Wriothlesley down his nose, displeased with his insistence. “We danced—and must I remind you it was in fact *yourself* who pushed me into such a position?” The Iudex closes his eyes and shakes his head. “She said to not feel obligated, but I was not about to put my image at risk from refusing a woman a dance.” He glances around sharply at the eavesdropping attendees milling around them, noting their haste to glance away from the duo. “There are many eyes and ears here, and now I’ll have to dance with more young women so as to not look enamoured with one young lady.”

“Ah, yes, here comes the impartiality talk again.” Wriothesley rolls his eyes. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Besides, wouldn’t it be such a good publicity stunt for you and this whole marriage thing?” The Duke leans forward, eyes wide and urging. “Furina won’t keep this a secret. She won’t keep it on the down-low. You, of all people, know how much she adores gossip. So, curate a whole story about this mysterious young woman the Chief Justice has fallen head over heels for at the *bal du mercredi soir* and give the journalists something to occupy themselves with.”

Neuvillette quietens, staring at the marble floor in thought. Wriothesley, ever the shrewd businessman, if you will, has once again made a veritable proposition that could prove beneficial...or completely backfire.

“[Name] does not seem like the kind of person who would enjoy the exposure.” The Chief Justice shakes his head in finality. “Are you sure there is no other choice?”

Wriothesley observes the look on Neuvillette’s face; one of desperation and disinclination. *He’s torn*, the Duke thinks, pursing his lips. He contemplates silently for a while, weighing the options and the outcomes, wracking his brains for something that will solve his friend’s dilemma—before the perfect idea hits him.

Neuvillette can just see those cogs and wheels turning in that cunning, shrewd brain of his. The moment Wriothesley’s eyes light up in realisation, Neuvillette immediately feels a dark sense of foreboding.

“Listen, this is what you should do...”

And as Wriothesley lowly murmurs his scheme into the Iudex’s ear, the droplets of rain that were splattering listlessly against the pavement suddenly cease.

a/n

still trying to work out ao3...it really does feel like a website right out of 2011 🐼

anyway, if you'd like to read this on tumblr, please click [here](#). I post first on tumblr. thank you for reading!

— l'envie de pleurer

Chapter Summary

two people under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

Neuvillette has always been a curious individual.

Why do humans cry? Was one of his very first observations when he was just a young dragon. When he was born with no memories of his previous form, nor with any answers as to exactly *why* he was reborn, essentially; and when Neuvillette had entered society.

He was a stiff, off-putting person—his human form was beautiful, but intimidating, making humans all around to shy away from him. They all thought he was arrogant, disagreeable, haughty; this confused him mightily. *They hardly know me. They've never spoken to me. Why are they so sure I'm going to harm them?*

After years of rejection, resentment mixed with incertitude brewed within him—resentment towards the humans who took one look at him and deemed him as scum, and incertitude for who he was meant to be.

However, it was the newly instigated Hydro Archon who encouraged him to give the humans one more chance. Her words, uncharacteristically soft, still ring clear within his mind today—you will see much in the human world. *From the delightful to the depressing, and one day, when you have dwelt among humanity long enough, you will be placed to bring judgement over all as a spokesperson for Fontaine's past.*

As he embraced his destined role as Chief Justice, Neuvillette was soon privy to all kinds of walks of life for humanity—and how it was not right to put them into a box, to confine them to a stereotype. To assume that all were evil, that all would shun him, when there were many he had met over his long life, and many more he would meet, that were good at heart, and that accepted him as one of them.

The resentment dissolved like ashes into water, melting into purity of heart, and newly awakened fondness for humans. He came to accept their faults, that there would always be good and evil, and how it was up to him—as the primary face of justice itself—to make sure the two opposites were balanced out.

He himself was redeemed, and therefore understood that the same factor applied to those seemingly helpless. Change was daunting, but it was also inevitable. Neuvillette changed his

views, and thus he himself was transposed for the better.

Neuvillette would never, however, understand emotions. The concept was utterly foreign to him—but the one thing that puzzled him the most was how *he* had them. *How can I feel something I cannot fathom?*

Like the depths of the chasmic seas that encaged the lands around them, one would never come to know of what lurks within the immeasurable darkness of those uncharted waters—much like the human heart. Although with a human form, Neuvillette adapted and accepted, but he did not *become*. He did not know the true purpose for exactly *why* he was born, and he doubted he'd ever find out. But he faced each day, burned each bridge, and grew to love humanity as one would love their own.

No one is without sin, not even the just Iudex, and no one goes without mistakes; but his philosophy is to *learn* from them, and make a change for a greater future.

Neuvillette *feels*. He *feels* the anger, the indignance, the *heartbreak* of the people who stand behind those docks, yelling passionately and jutting fingers at each other to try and push their objective across. He *feels* the tears streaming down loved ones' cheeks as they bid their convicted farewell. He *feels* their anguish as they descend into the deeps, down into the confines of the Fortress of Meropide, likely never to feel the warmth of the sun upon their skin again.

And he *feels* the blood—the *life*—emptying from their veins, from their hearts, as they stare spiritlessly at the improvident ceiling of the Opera Epiclese, having paid the price of their honour, their freedom, and the final slivers of their humanity on the arena floor. While the crowd is enraptured, the Hydro Archon beguiled at the sight, Neuvillette would watch on with an expression kept carefully void of emotion, of feeling—but the rain pounding relentlessly against the windows is sign enough towards his deepest sentiments.

The Chief Justice takes zero pleasure in the misery of others. If he had the ability to take it away, he would. To live in a world unrequiring of justice, of prison, is the perfect ideal, and what he strives to grasp. To live in a land empty of discrimination, where each and every one is accepted. Something as out of reach as the stars he gazes up at nightly, but not invisible.

Neuvillette grieves. He has long accepted that fact as part of his being, essence and existence. Although finding great difficulty in *expressing* such corresponding emotions, he feels them with such grounding intensity that it leaves his form frozen, unable to move, within the pouring rain.

The topic of 'love'—the type vastly different from mere platonic attachment; the type *dearest* Furina wants him to experience at least once in his long life—is a foreign, undiscovered theme to the Hydro Sovereign. Romance is almost unfathomable to him—he knows to appreciate the beauty of a loving couple joining together as one in a jovial ceremony with family shedding tears of joy for the two, but the Chief Justice has overseen too many divorces in court that vary with fiery disputes to glacial, eerily calm separations to believe it is 'forever'.

It would only be natural for him to be so wary of the concept, and involving himself in it as a married man. If he were to marry a human woman, he would outlive them—and the problem would only worsen if grew to love her. The pain would be too much to bear—that he understood, considering the sheer misery and sorrow those widowed—and even divorced—endure upon disunion with their spouse.

That is why he was very reluctant to agree to Wriothlesley's plan—not only was he sure the young woman in question would vehemently disagree, but he himself found the idea to be, yes, clever and with potential, but also utterly outrageous. If the third party involved was not an airheaded Archon only worried about her next slice of cake or the scandals brought to light in the Opera Epiclese, the scheme would be deemed truly absurd.

Navia, incensed at her loss of chance to pair you up with your future husband at the ball, availed herself to her last resort—champagne.

“Th...thanks to this...” she slurs, pointing one wobbling forefinger uncomfortably close to your nose, “...you weren't able to—” *hiccup*, “find love!”

“Did I ever say I was in need of it, Navia?” You gently push her finger away, steadying her with her hand to her shoulder, keeping her from taking a little tumble off the bench. You both are outside, in the fresh night air, away from the stifling ambiance of wine, heat and sweat from the ballroom and breathing in the afterscent of the rain that had just stopped. Miraculously, you'd located one outdoor seat in a nearby gazebo, somehow dry from the downpour. Navia had inhaled two and a half more glasses of champagne under your nose and left her a flushed, babbling mess. Sighing, you'd accepted the inevitable and kept her company until the carriage arrived to take her home. “You really don't need to play matchmaker for me. You say you're content with single life, so what makes you so sure I'm not?”

Awaiting an answer, you allow her a few moments to collect her muddled wits and reply—but you receive none. With a groan under your breath, you find she's fallen asleep, mouth half-open with the beginnings of drool starting to leak out. The scent of alcohol is strong on her, and you know she's dead unconscious—as she ever gets when she drinks too much. Huffing out a weary breath through your nose, you pat her shoulder and allow her to snore away upon you.

In no world would you ever leave her alone, defenceless; her Geo Vision would only be so useful in her protection when she is *sober*, not passed out. And who knows what kind of sex-deprived knaves would venture along and decide to have a little fun with an unconscious lady—the very thought made you shudder.

The late-night air has a slight chill; one that has you internally berating yourself for being so careless as to forget your evening shawl—one specially reserved for such occasions. It has finally stopped raining, but the clouds still hang heavily over the sky, blotting out the stars.

You lean your head against the wooden pillar behind your seat in the gazebo and close your eyes, willing yourself to destress. With a wasted friend at your side and the taste of

impending rain upon your tongue, you allow yourself to fall into your thoughts and do what you're best at— *overthink* .

Well. Honestly, I think I made history tonight. You are getting ready to kiss your privacy goodbye, considering how the rumour mill would already be in full swing due to your dance with the Chief Justice. *This was a big mistake.*

Navia's soft snores draw you from your thoughts as you sense footsteps. Wary, you straighten, preparing yourself to tell whoever the pesky man was that followed out for Navia to piss off. You await the person to step from behind the fragrant plum tree in front of the gazebo's entrance.

A not-so-polite statement, that's ready to fire, dies on your tongue the moment the person approaching finally enters your line of sight.

Oh, no.

Neuvillette doesn't appear to see you at first, calmly sauntering through the garden; his long, silvery hair gliding out behind him gracefully, footfalls soft and unobtrusive against the grass. There is no moonlight, but you can recognise his silhouette easily by the way he carries himself and his presence.

Should I greet him? You don't really want to. You're afraid you'd be bothering him. The embarrassment of putting him on the spot while dancing still leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

You opt to remain quiet, feigning ignorance to his presence. *There's no way I can move with waking Navia and thus gaining his attention.*

Neuvillette continues on walking, before coming to a stop in front of a rosebed, the view overlooking the sea. There isn't much to look at, as there is no moon or starlight to provide luminance; yet you can't help but feel like he can see what you cannot.

Navia's snores are not exactly quiet; you surmise he must be too deep within his thoughts to have noticed you as he walked past. He is still within hearing distance—but he does not turn around, does not greet you; he shows no sign of knowledge towards your presence.

The breeze caresses his cascading hair gently, letting it drift back and forth as his towering form lingers silently. With his hands behind his back, posture ramrod straight, you suddenly feel like you're imposing on his alone time. And just as you move to lightly shake Navia awake and leave the Iudex in peace, a droplet of rain splashes against the top of your head.

Seriously? You glance up in annoyance at the sky. Even under the roof of the pavilion, you'd still be in the direct line of the rain, which is growing heavier by the second.

Then you pause—*Neuvillette has no umbrella.* You glance over your shoulder at him. His head is now bowed, posture not quite tense nor relaxed; in fact, you'd say his broad shoulders are almost *slumped*. A stance you could never have seen or imagined the *Iudex* in, especially when he is always so tall and intimidating and unyielding in that hall.

Previously, you had nabbed an umbrella from the umbrella stand near the front door as you escorted Navia out for fresh air. It had just stopped raining, and you knew it would be wise to take one anyway, especially with how overcast it was, and now with the rain bucketing down and the most influential man presently moping out in it, you clutched the item in your hand, contemplating.

What if he catches a cold? You glance hesitantly at Navia, who seems to be contentedly snoozing away, safely out of the rain. It's now bucketing down in incessant sheets, soaking anyone out in it to the bone. Thanks to the darkness of the night and the thick, pelting rain, his form is distorted and almost invisible.

You quickly make your decision and snap open your umbrella, bravely stepping out into the downpour. Immediately, your hem is soaked from the muddy ground, but you manage to manoeuvre your way through its unrelenting force.

"Monsieur Neuville!" You call, the sheer volume of the rain blotting out most of your voice. "Please! Come in from the rain!"

He does not appear to hear you, his head remaining bowed. Clicking your tongue in irritation, you stride through the rain, the umbrella heavy under the relentless shower of rain, and arrive at his side.

You thrust your arm up so the umbrella covers the both of you. Finally, the Iudex is drawn from his thoughts, appearing confused at how suddenly the rain has stopped attacking him, and slowly turning his dull amethyst gaze to you.

You almost gasp at the sight—*is that the rain, or are those tears?* You can't really differentiate—his eyes, usually a bright, stern lilac, is reduced to two opaque mauve beads with the unmistakable gleam of *sadness* in them.

You blink, your words of reprimand for his stupidity of standing out in the rain dead on your tongue. "Uh...Monsieur Neuville...are you okay?"

"Ah, my apologies." *Why are you apologising?* You are slightly taken aback at his sudden expression of regret. "I...got fairly immersed in my thoughts."

"Do you like standing out in the pouring rain, Monsieur?" You ask before thinking better of it, keeping the umbrella steady over his head. It is quite the strain on your arm due to his height, and you almost flinch back from him in realisation at your imperious tone. Lowering your head in beg-pardon, you awkwardly adjust your hold on the umbrella's handle. "What I mean is...Your Honour, you could very well catch a cold." Then, you take note of his dripping coat. "Oh, look! You're soaked to the bone!"

You know that taking him back into the ballroom is not an option—it would be utterly humiliating for him, and could taint his image. Unsure of what exactly to do, you take in his condition: those ivory locks plastered feebly to his forehead, drenched clothing that is now so lacklustre, and that melancholy look in his eyes—eyes that have not strayed from your face for one moment since you approached. Their intensity unsettles you, yet calms you—it's a strange sensation, one you cannot make anything of, and you are not sure if you want to.

You have caught Neuville in a moment of vulnerability, one where his true emotions shine through.

Now, you do not see an authoritative man—the one famous for his just, unwavering impartiality, and the one who virtually rules Fontaine with an iron fist; one who is more suitable for the title of an Archon than Focalors.

However, instead, you see a lonely soul, one who does not know the feeling of a shoulder to lean on. An abrupt, blooming feeling of empathy and compassion explodes within your chest.

An inexplicable urge to reach up and brush his hair from his eyes makes you clench your fist and resist, merely keeping the umbrella above your heads. You're unaware of how the back of your dress is currently being soaked right through from the rain, uncovered by the umbrella.

Neuville lets out a breathy chuckle, one with no humour in it. "Please, you needn't be concerned for me, truly—"

"Monsieur, people can die from intense chills due to cold, wet weather, such as this." You sweep your hand out from under the umbrella in a gesture to the rain, your hand immediately drenched upon impact. You quickly wipe it against the dry material of your dress. "How can you possibly expect me to not be concerned for you?"

Neuville studies your expression closely, despite the darkness obscuring much of your face. He sees none of the judgement he was expecting to see—instead, he sees genuine concern one would have for a peer they've found in the midst of an internal crisis, with seemingly no one to turn to. He sees *understanding*.

The rain lightens.

You notice, your tense expression easing at the slight assuaging of the rain. A sensation of fulfilment at your relieved countenance immediately confuses him. Then, all positive emotions are swept away like the dark, rushing current ever-raging within him at the recollection of the question he must inevitably ask you—and the downpour intensifies once more.

"Oh, I really thought the Hydro Dragon was finishing up his bawling session." Your words are spoken in jest, tone slightly sarcastic, and Neuville instantly feels regretful at dulling your mood once again. *Ah, what a nuisance I must be.*

Then, to his utmost surprise, you jokingly cup your hand to your mouth and call out, "Hydro Dragon, Hydro Dragon, don't cry!"

He blinks. Once. Twice—before barely restraining himself from bursting out in laughter. Immediately, at the swift rush of amusement, the rain completely relents.

"Ah! There we are." The clouds recede, and the soft winking of stars, in all their glorious whites and blues, glimmer in the deep blue of the sky. You smile, a rare sight for you, up at

the Iudex. “But you’re still all wet. Really, *what*—with all due respect, of course, Your Honour—were you *thinking*, standing out here in the rain like that?”

Finally, Neuville drops his gaze to the ground, then to the roses, and back up to you, through his lashes. “Please rest assured that I would not have caught a cold. I am...resilient.”

You shake your head in disapproval. “That is not the point, Monsieur Neuville. I understand that I have caught you at a very unideal time, but please understand why I was so...well, *aggrieved*, to see you right in the worst of the downpour.”

Neuville has to press his lips together to avoid smiling *too* widely. He tilts his head, before raising one hand and gently taking the umbrella from your hand. Your hand visibly flinches at the unexpected contact, but you swiftly lower your hand to your side as he continues to keep it above your heads, despite the rain having stopped.

“Thank you kindly for your concern, Mademoiselle [Name].” He inclines his head towards you in a benign gesture of gratitude. A soft smile lifts his lips. “You are the first person in a very long time to acknowledge my wellbeing in such a way.”

Your eyebrows fly sky-high in surprise at his words. “You can’t be serious! No one has *ever* asked how the Iudex of Fontaine is faring?”

“I am not one who is predisposed to lying.” His smile is small; self-deprecating. “But, yes—at least, not *genuine* expressions of concern, if you will.”

Neuville, however, feels guilty within—like a dirty criminal uncharged for his crimes, living with their dark residue on his conscience continually. Wriothesley’s plan still joyously sings its conniving schemes within his mind, driving him mad. *Oh, how am I to break this to her? How do I approach her about this?*

The Chief Justice is no socialite. In fact, apart from his magisterial stance within the Opera Epiclese, he could be regarded as one hell of an introvert. Awkward—akin to a young foal taking its first steps upon wobbly, newborn legs—and shy, Neuville struggles with socialising. He, of course, knows when to force himself to, but he prefers leaving all the chatting to the more-on-the-extraverted-side people like the Duke or Furina—despite her infrequency of attending balls and high-societal occasions, which almost goes against her overbearing personality. To think such a gossip and such a romantic as her would *adore* appearing at balls—the *hub* of delicious slander and scandal—but she attends as many as Neuville does himself—almost zero.

With his social skills lacking and ineptness towards expressing emotions, Neuville is easy to regard as arrogant, haughty and detached to most. The people of Fontaine only see the image of a just, but superior individual—not one with a life behind doors and is secretly solitary. With the heavy burden of keeping their very own Archon’s unrelenting vivacity and penchant for trouble in check, delivering the Oratrice Mécanique d’Analyse Cardinale’s verdict that commonly goes against his own principles and opinion of the matter and upholding his impartial image as an unbiased judge, the Chief Justice finds himself stranded—*marooned*—on an isolated island, one so terribly cold and lonely, with only his thoughts and tears to keep him company. And to think that the first person in *centuries* to express

solicitude for him is one he must bait into a (frankly outrageous) proposition goes against any and every moral code he retains as a gentleman. As the first person to see and treat him as a human being with *feelings* that are easily disturbed—like the calm waters of the sea before the winds of a hurricane roughly sweep them up—the last thing he desires to see is the look of sheer repulse towards him; for him to be misjudged once again.

The irony . Inwardly, Neuville chuckles sardonically. He sees a woman no one would take a second glance at in the street—a woman who is resolved to her own thoughts and opinions, one with a mind of her own—and someone who would never take kindly to being tied down by the chains of marriage.

Neuville is, by no means, a controlling man. He would never try to dictate her life, and would never ask anything of her that would make her uncomfortable and, worse, frightened of him, but he cannot help but feel like he's trying to lure a songbird into a cage, to keep it confined and its wings clipped.

Neuville would never pin any woman down. That is the last thing he can possibly imagine himself doing. And he most certainly could not bring himself to do so to this woman.

All he sees is a misunderstood soul. Much like himself. Maybe that's why he resonates with her so significantly—and why he is so reluctant and remorseful to push her into the fray Furina kicked up.

He is wrenched from his internal fretting at her voice, the smile now gone from her face, that pinched mask of inexpression placed over her features once again. *Oh. How regrettable. She had a nice smile.*

Her lips are stiff, but her eyes are not. They are stoic, but not cold. It relieves him.

“Monsieur Neuville, please do not misjudge my concern as shallow, wily ulterior motives towards you.” Her eyes shine with clear repulse towards the thought. *Ah, when was the last time I saw such sincerity?* “I do not seek anything from you, so, pray, don't take me as one of those knaves with their eyes set on the prize of wealth and notability behind your name.”

Yes, I knew she'd be like this. Minute by minute, Wriothsley's plot is beginning to seem more and more hopeless. One tantamount to implausibility. One bound to misfire, and the shrapnel that would embed itself within his soul could never be purged.

However, I must try. Neuville would prefer a more formal setting—one like his office, not the gardens of some noble he has, frankly, forgotten the name of. But, he fears he would never be able to gain a chance of speaking with her like this again if he let this moment slip.

Jaw clenching, Neuville straightens his posture, and swallows. You notice his swift change in countenance, and you tense slightly at the more solemn ambiance he takes on. *Have I done something wrong?*

“Mademoiselle [Name], I have a very abrupt and, frankly, impudent proposition to make.” You turn your head away slightly so you gaze at him sidelong, wary. *What business could the Chief Justice possibly have with me?*

“...Of course,” you respond, steeling yourself. You don’t know whether to feel honoured or cautious—but, you are leaning towards the latter.

Neuvillette lifts one fisted hand to his mouth, softly, awkwardly, coughing into it, amethyst gaze beginning to veer away elsewhere. Your eyes narrow in suspicion. “You see, I am in... quite the predicament—one involving our dearest Archon. I’m sure you picked up on something along those lines during our interaction with the Duke of Meropide.”

You recall his cryptic words—*Maybe I just did both of you a favour. Maybe I just got Furina off your back.*

Nodding slowly, unsurely, you hum in affirmation. “I do, somewhat.”

“Well...” he continues, hand dropping back down, behind his back. Neuvillette meets your eyes once more, stare intent. “Lady Furina has developed an unhealthy interest in third-rate novels imported from Inazuma as of late.”

You begin to lose patience at his beating around the bush—you never took him as one to do so, so you surmise it must be something serious, and something that has put him in an extremely awkward position. “She has taken a liking to the bawdy romance stories from Yae Publishing House?”

“Yes.” He purses his lips. To occupy himself, he lowers the umbrella, gently shakes the rainwater from it so as to not spray it everywhere, and closes it. You reach out to take it, but Neuvillette shakes his head and tucks it under his arm politely. “And thus came some rather...*cretinous* ideas.”

“Ah, I see.” The realisation is quick to dawn on you. *She’s trying to hitch him up with someone. But, why is he discussing this with me?*

Neuvillette shakes his head. “I have tried negotiating with her, but she’s quite adamant, you see. Wriothesley, as shrewd as he is, suggested something to me.”

He falls silent once again, and you find yourself left in suspense. Just as you move to demand an explanation, you take in his conflicted expression. *This must be serious; so much so he’s really considering what to say next.*

The Iudex then squeezes his eyes shut in defeat, and lets out a heavy sigh that leaves him looking deflated. “Furina wants me to marry. She insisted on me attending this ball tonight to find a suitable prospect.” Neuvillette then shoots a stern glare in the ballroom’s direction, as if looking through the walls and at someone—someone you’ve got a good idea about their identity. “Navia introduced me to you, and Wriothesley, in all his craftiness, saw you, deemed you a good fit, and thus we danced.”

Again, understanding is beginning to wash over you. Your eyes widen. *No. No, no, no.*

“The rumour mill is now running at full capacity, and thus leaves me in a rather unideal situation, you see.” You do. You see it *too* well. He continues, voice quieter, more hesitant. “The impartial Iudex, the most abstinent man in the nation, one unwed and never *to* wed.”

Neuvillette shook his head at the irony—the sheer *absurdity* of the situation. “The headlines will go crazy. You yourself said it would be all over the tabloids tomorrow. So, in essence, Furina has won, and has pushed me into a position where I simply *must* marry—and unfortunately, the most ideal candidate in this debacle is you.”

He has fixed his painfully deep mauve gaze on yours once again, and you find yourself lowering your head, eyes at your feet. “...I see.”

Silence. Chilled, awkward silence. You contemplate your options, how exactly you’re going to get yourself out of this. All in one rush of short-lived, internal anger, you blame Navia for dragging you along and into this, you curse Wriothesley’s name for pushing you to dance with an unwilling man, and most of all, you suddenly feel quite inclined to setting a match to a certain Archon’s quarters.

You, however, do not blame Neuvillette in the slightest. You fully understand his point of view, how regretful he is towards this entire fiasco, and how cumbersome his current position now is.

That does not mean, however, you are going to agree to this. *Does this mean I’ll have to marry him?* You glance up at him, to find the man also staring at the ground, almost in shame. *I mean, it’s not like he’s ugly — in fact, very much the opposite, but...* You purse your lips and turn to stare out at the moonlit waters of the Fontanian seas. *It will mean I can kiss goodbye to my freedom. My independence.*

“I am willing to sort out a contractual marriage—one with conditions. It will only be on paper.” You turn your gaze to him when he begins speaking again. His gaze is earnest, almost begging. “I will ask nothing of you. We will not have to act like an actual couple.” Neuvillette takes in a deep breath, broad chest rising and falling with the motion, his lips thinned. “This will be temporary. Just until the gossip calms down, and Furina’s attention is drawn elsewhere.” Then, you hear him mutter, “Goodness, I wish we were in my office...”

“Please...give me time to think.” *I need to get out of here.* You swallow thickly, heart pounding. You really don’t know what to make of the situation. “Three days, bare minimum. I will make an appointment with you to see you then.”

“No need, I will make a personal adjustment within my schedule for three days from now. How does three in the afternoon sound?” You easily pick up on the relief in his voice. *Goodness, the amount of stress he must be under!* You quickly nod your agreement. “Yes, of course.”

Suddenly, you remember Navia, the carriage, and the need to get home. Taking a step towards the gazebo, you pause, turning back to the Chief Justice. “Will there be any kind of way I could personally have a chat with Her Flamboyancy about this?”

The corners of Neuvillette’s mouth twitch at your humorous, sarcastic reference to the childish Hydro Archon. “You needn’t bother yourself. I...” His expression darkened and froze with severity, like that of a father preparing a nice long lecture for his misbehaving child. “Will deal with her myself.”

Swallowing, you nod, unsure of what to say in reply. Resolving yourself to defeat, you then curtsy and express your goodbyes. “Farewell, Monsieur Neuville.” You brave one last look into his eyes—ones that are fixed intensely upon yours, nothing but contrition shining through within them. “Have a pleasant remainder of your evening.”

With that, you turn, swiftly making your way back to the gazebo to awaken Navia.

You take five steps before you hear his voice call out, “[Name].”

You pause in your tracks once more, turning to face him, perturbed by the sudden use of your name without the formal ‘Mademoiselle’ before it. “Yes, Monsieur Neuville?”

He bows his head. “I am truly sorry for involving you in this disaster. I truly, truly am.”

You sigh, a humourless smile curling your lips. “I find that I, too, somewhat am as well.”

With one final curtsy, you make for Navia, dead set on getting home.

a/n

chapters will be posted bi-weekly (basically whenever im free/have motivation).

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— la rencontre

Chapter Summary

two people under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

Sleep evaded you for the nights to follow until your appointment with the Chief Justice. When you had finally dropped Navia off at her residence that night, of which Silver and Melus were quick to take her in and thank you, you were left to your muddled thoughts, skin still buzzing from the dance, the rain, and the conversation with the Iudex.

Tomorrow, you're to set off for the Palais Mermonia. Tomorrow, you will discuss this whole dilemma further—and come to some kind of conclusion.

As you feared, the tabloids went crazy with the news of Chief Justice Neuville dancing with some mysterious woman—one eyewitnesses claimed to have been quite homely in features and physique, therefore unable to recall her features much, but the primary focus was how the Iudex of Fontaine, one who has been in that same seat and position for *centuries*, has seemed to finally found a bride—or, if not, at least a temporary paramour.

Truly unheard of.

A muscle in Neuville's jaw ticks an irregular rhythm at the headlines on the newspaper before him. Over and over does his mauve-hued eyes scan the words, *Chief Justice Dances With Unidentified Woman At Countess Girard's Recent Ball!* with rapt attention. Well, not really—after rereading it about five times the words began to melt into each other and become gibberish.

A breathy, elated laugh snaps him from his thoughts as a slight gust of wind hits his face when a certain young lady dumps her copy of the newspaper down on the desk before them. His eyes snap up to look at Lady Furina, languidly slouched against the large, comfy armchair she'd dragged over to have a face-to-face chat with the Iudex, her smile wide and indulgent. Neuville thinks her current deportment is quite unbecoming; he opens his mouth to order her to correct her posture and maintain a more ladylike stance, but she begins talking in her quick, excited way whenever she's overjoyed before he can get a word out.

“Neuville, who knew you were such a smooth operator?”

The Chief Justice sighs, giving up on her, placing his own paper down and bringing a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Furina, apologies for disappointing you, but I did not

dance with her because I was following your orders of finding a spouse.”

Furina’s brows raise, but her smile does not waver. “So? It turned out quite exceptionally, did it not?” She crosses one leg over the other—Neuvillette inwardly nods in approval—and places her chin on top of two linked hands. “Either way, you’ve now *found* an ideal candidate for a wife. However...” The Hydro Archon picks up her copy of the paper and her upper lip curls slightly in derision at the image of the woman on the cover. The Kamera shot is blurry, but of good enough quality to make out the lady’s features. “Couldn’t you have picked someone of more...I don’t know...*visual* merit?”

Neuvillette sucks in a sharp breath at her words, lips thinning in disapproval. “What a horrid thing to say, Furina. She is, in fact, a gracious woman who carries herself with dignity and *poise*.” Neuvillette takes this chance to indirectly censure Furina about her common unladylike poses while sitting. The Hydro Archon notices this, and scowls petulantly. The Iudex continues before she can butt in. “She is, yes, aloof and stand-offish, but during my brief time of conversing with her, she had shown herself to mean well and was quite reasonable.”

He, of course, conveniently leaves out the small garden incident where she had caught him languishing in the rain and his awkward confession of their very own Archon’s latest shenanigans, of which she had ended up dragged into the mess inadvertently. Neuvillette has an inkling that telling Furina about the occasion would give him an even bigger headache than he already has.

“You have such peculiar taste in *everything*, Neuvillette.” Furina rolls her eyes, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. “I really can’t fathom what goes on in that thick skull of yours.”

“If you are referring to my chosen spouse and her...*visuals*, Furina, I am quite disappointed in you.” The Chief Justice fixes the Hydro Archon with a particularly severe look. “I am not seeking beauty, for it is fleeting.” He then sighs, hand twitching, eager for a large goblet of Inazuman spring water. “You’re acting as if she’s a hilichurl incarnate. *I* think she is quite acceptable.”

“Whatever you say,” Furina sighs and shakes her head. “And no, I’m not saying she’s *ugly*, because she isn’t.” She twists her lips about in a way as if she’s contemplating something. “I just thought...well, that you’d go for someone beautiful and...and *comely*.”

“Yes, I think I *will* burn those frivolous romance books you’ve been reading.” Neuvillette’s tone is flat with disdain for her antics. He levels her with a direct, disapproving stare. “You’ve spent too much time with that nonsensical ‘literature’ from Inazuma. Like I said, looks are not everything, and I don’t think she’s plain. In fact, if you gave her a chance, you’d find her to be enjoyable company.”

“Okay, sure thing, Iudex.” The Hydro Archon brushes off his reprimanding words like a querulous child who just had a good telling off—of which, really, she did. Neuvillette internally thinks he went too easy on her—but then again, she *is* the Hydro Archon, and though it is his place to keep in check, it is not his position to act as a father figure and guide her every move. He sighs, seeing her pettish response to his words, and knows that

everything he says will just go through one ear and out the other. “I mean, I’m going to meet her at *some* point, right? Since I’m the one she’ll have to thank for helping her score such an eligible man as you for a husband, that is.”

The Chief Justice frowns, pursing his lips. “You will meet her, but she will not thank you. She hasn’t even agreed to marry me yet.”

“*What?*” Furina jumps, mouth agape, her heterochromatic eyes wide. “You danced with her, but you didn’t even *try* to woo her into agreeing with you immediately? Goodness, Neuvillette, we’re on a *time limit* here! You must get married pronto—but your most ideal prospect hasn’t even expressed her assent yet?”

“No, and she has every right to refuse.” Neuvillette does not bother to look up at her from his paperwork this time. He dips his quill into the jar of ink before continuing on. “You can order me to marry, but you cannot force her to agree.”

“I am the Hydro Archon—the *queen* of this nation.” Furina’s tone turns sniffy. “She is Fontainian, no? So I have every right to order her to marry you, in fact. According to the *Codex Egerius*, under the Fontainian Legislation’s section 442—‘*the presiding Hydro Archon has full legal dispensation to decree a living citizen of Fontaine into coercion with her orders, and said citizen is obligated to adhere*’.” She grins triumphantly at Neuvillette’s expression. He stares at her, eyes wide with apprehension, and cold with dissent. However, as reluctant he may be to accept her reasoning, Neuvillette has no choice. He just dearly hopes you discovering that factor of the law does not make you abhor him.

Neuvillette silently places his quill into its holder, jaw taut and eyes narrowed. Furina may be his superior, but he knows every way to constrain her into complying to his own orders. He does not enjoy such methods, and rarely uses them, but now is an uncommon and unwelcome occasion—one where he is personally insulted. “Lady Furina.”

She unconsciously straightens at his deep tone, that authoritative voice in full force and not his previous, more relaxed one. Blinking, Furina barely keeps herself from flinching when she meets gazes with the Iudex’s glacial stare. She is now silenced, and Neuvillette sets his signature intimidating stare piercingly on the Hydro Archon before him.

“You *will* not, under any circumstances, force that young woman into marrying me.” He leans back, frowning deeply, arms crossed over his wide chest. “*That* is tyranny—the very thing you must, as an Archon, never manifest. For once, Furina, stop acting like such a child.”

“Ugh!” Furina clenches her fists in anger at her side, leaping from her chair. Her cheeks are flushed with anger and humiliation. It’s not uncommon that she is chastised by the Iudex—but none of this level. She can see it quite clearly—Neuvillette is not making a request, he is issuing an *order*. One she, as his superior, has found herself with no other choice but to obey.

I’m the one who gives the orders around here! Furina leaps to her feet, barely restraining herself from stamping her foot childishly and proving Neuvillette right. Scrambling for words to shoot back with, she finds herself unable to maintain eye contact with the Chief Justice.

“...Fine, you win this one, Neuvillette,” she huffs, wanting nothing more than to throw the chair she was sitting on at his head. Furina mimics his stance: crossing her arms, tilting her chin up so she was staring at him from down her nose haughtily, lips pursed. “But, mark my words, Iudex: one day, you will *both* be kissing my hands in sheer gratitude for pairing you both together. I see it. I know it. You doubt me now, but you just haven’t gotten a taste of my *true* capabilities yet.”

Neuvillette, now sick of her insistence and puerile skylarking, lifts one hand from his arms, gesturing behind the chair before his desk and points towards the door of his office. “I’ve had enough of your company for one day, Furina. Once you’ve regathered your wits and reflected on your untoward actions today, we may speak again.”

Jaw clenched so firmly Furina felt her teeth ache, she gives an indignant *hmph!* and whirls around, marching for the door.

Hand on the knob, she pauses, countenance suddenly less affronted, and glances back over her shoulder at the Iudex. He appears to not have noticed her remaining presence, busy scribbling along some paper in that too-elegant penmanship of his.

They will marry. She internally vows, eyes narrowing. I will make her marry him. And they will fall in love, and Neuvillette will finally be happy.

Nodding to herself, she finally yanks open the door, startling the little Melusine behind it, who had her paw raised to knock.

“Oh!” Furina gets a bit of a scare also, jumping back slightly in surprise. The Melusine’s lilac-hued eyes blink widely, before scrambling to bow respectfully before her Archon.

“My lady!” Sedene, the Melusine, straightens after offering her greetings. “My apologies for alarming you. I have come to notify the Chief Justice about his upcoming trial in half an hour.”

Neuvillette, having heard the Melusine’s words, stands from his desk and adjusts his collar. “Very well. Furina, if you are off to watch the court case, you can see yourself out first.” His tone brooked no room for arguments.

Fully understanding that factor, Furina resists rolling her eyes and nods once stiffly, stepping past Liath without so much of a glance and sauntering off, head held high and lips thinned in umbrage.

Finally, Neuvillette breathes a slight sigh of relief once it is quiet again. Sedene softly closes the door and totters forward as quickly as her little legs can carry her, holding up the manila folder thick with the corresponding papers for today’s hearing. “Here you are, Monsieur Neuvillette. Everything you need about the fraud case is in this folder.”

Sedene’s modest words and countenance relaxes Neuvillette; giving her a warm, albeit small, smile, he accepts the file and places it on his desk, taking a seat behind it once more. “Thank you, Sedene. I shall peruse these for fifteen minutes. Come get me by then.”

“Of course.” The Melusine bobs into a bow and turns to toddle out. “Would you like some water, Monsieur Neuville?”

“Ah, that would be perfect, thank you.” His throat *is* feeling quite parched, considering all the arguing he just did with the callow Hydro Archon. “Please make sure it is the latest batch of spring water we ordered from Inazuma, Sedene.”

“Right away, Monsieur Neuville.” Sedene is already at the door. “I shall be shortly.”

His relief is short-lived, however—not only does he have another court case to deal with today, but he also has the meeting with you tomorrow to stress over. *I need a holiday, I really do.*

The rain poured relentlessly against the Opera Epiclese that day. And if anyone noticed that the Chief Justice was more terse than usual, no one made any comment on it—wisely.

You grip your purse in a vice-like hold as you try to appear patient in the Palais Mermonia’s waiting room. Inside, you are shaking. You barely manage to conceal the trembling of your hands as you clutch your handbag, mouth dry and eyes flighty.

All the gestionnaires continue to busily go about their day, taking no notice of you, their arms full of papers and other documents. They are clearly overworked—their gaunt expressions and slumped shoulders are sign enough of their constant overtime and stress.

Hm, they must be short-staffed. People-watching is a pastime of yours when you’re left alone, in a crowd, with nothing else to do. You make sure to keep your stares brief so as to not creep people out, but the most fascinating ones to watch are the Melusines.

The adorable little creatures are always so dutiful; ambling about, always with a sweet smile on their charming faces. It is no wonder that everyone loves the Melusines—how could anyone possibly hate such sincere, harmless little things?

You’d read in a historical column of the paper that stated how once, centuries ago, when the creatures were only just introduced into Fontaine and Neuville had recently been instigated as Iudex, they suffered severe discrimination and persecution. The Fontainians are so distrustful of them to the point where harming them was not above them. And when an accused Melusine committed suicide to prove her innocence, it was like a breaking point for them—the Iudex, especially.

The story horrified you. Now, present day Melusines are accepted as one of Fontaine’s own, and anyone brave—or foolish enough—to try and harm them are swiftly dealt to by the populace, and most certainly the Chief Justice *personally*.

The Melusines are quiet, happy little creatures, and it’s no wonder everyone is so fond of them.

As you lose interest in watching the gestionnaires bustle about, you redirect your gaze to the clock on the wall, the time reading 2:54PM.

Six minutes to go, and I can get this whole dilemma out of my hair. You drop your stare to your sweaty hands, drawing in a deep breath in attempts to calm yourself.

Why am I so anxious? You purse your lips as you will yourself to relax, to not let your frayed nerves overthrow your resolve. *All I have to do is waltz in there and reason with the man—he's certainly not the argumentative type, surely he'd see my perspective and agree. I just have to tell him I don't want to marry him, that I'm willing to go against Lady Furina in court if push comes to shove, and that I'm sorry for him.*

You gulp, breathing a little bit laboured, but you keep your expression carefully unreadable, curt. In no way would you reveal your true sentiments to the impartial man seated right behind that door to your right. As unassuming as he may seem, by no means do you trust him.

You are drawn from your fretting when an adorable little Melusine with big, soft lilac eyes addresses you. “Mademoiselle [Name], it is time for your appointment with the Iudex.”

Discreetly sucking in a readying breath, you nod and manage a polite smile—which likely looked more like a grimace—moving to stand. “Well, please lead the way.”

The Melusine smiles warmly and turns to totter towards the door. “Please do not be nervous, Mademoiselle. Monsieur Neuville is an understanding man.”

Ah, she saw right through me. Your accommodating smile twists into a self-deprecating one. *Of course, she's not human. It likely wouldn't work on them.* “Oh, I assure you, I know. It's just...well, our purpose for the interview is one of utmost urgency and...stress.

The Melusine (her name is Sedene, as you read from her nametag), raises one paw up to knock on the tall door of the Chief Justice's office. But, she pauses, her smile remaining warm, but a bit smaller now, more comforting. “You've no reason to fret, I tell you. Whatever it is, Neuville will treat you kindly.”

With those soft words, she knocks three times on the door, and the familiar, deep voice of the Iudex swiftly responds. “Enter.”

You glance once more at the clock— *two o'clock on the dot.* You, again, draw in a somewhat shaky breath, and step past Sedene as she politely stands to the side for you to enter.

Neuville is not sitting at his desk; his back is to you, those long, ivory locks cascading down his broad shoulders and to his waist—those ocean-blue horn-like accessories almost glowing as the sunlight hits them at the perfect angle. However, the sun is now beginning to fade behind swift-moving clouds thickly blanketing the sky. *It's going to rain.*

The door clicks shut behind you, the soft sound sending a bolt of foreboding down your spine. *Why, in Teyvat, am I so afraid, really?*

Silence is quick to claim headship in the room: antsy silence from you, inscrutable quietude from the Iudex. It's terribly uncomfortable—perspiration beads on your upper lip, but your expression conveys no such corresponding anxiety.

“Monsieur Neuville,” you begin, chewing on the inside of your cheek in indecision. “I have arrived.”

“Yes, I see you have.” Finally, he turns, spearing you with that same, intense amethyst gaze. His stare is piercing, unrelenting, intent. Eyes unwavering, he gestures to the couch off to the side. “Please, have a seat.”

You break your gaze from his first, lowering your eyes to the ground before stepping towards the sofa. Sitting down, you stiffly place your purse at your side, clasping your hands before you as you force yourself to relax and lean back into the couch. Neuville remains standing, now staring at the top of his desk.

Using the silence to take in your surroundings, you admire how it is sparsely furnished, but elegant—an apt representation of his character. *He sure likes the colour blue*, you observe, taking note of the blue accents on the walls, the carpet, the shelves. Whoever the interior designer was for this room was certainly adept at their profession.

Neuville is dressed in his signature courtly attire—the regalia similar, but still different, to the raiment he had donned at the ball three nights ago. Tones of deep-sea blue and lighter cerulean line his clothes, accents of gold and white thrown into one very tasteful result.

His coattails, you note, subtly eyeing their peculiar shape and colour. *They look like...dragon scales. What an interesting selection of design.*

The sound of the soft clearing of a throat draws you from your observing; your eyes snapping up to look at the Iudex. One hand is closed into a loose fist as he *ahems* into it, gaze now not so intense. “Well, I’m sure the past three days have been...tense with this entire disaster on your mind.”

“Quite,” you answer, voice toneless. “I have not slept.” *No point in sugarcoating it.*

The Iudex, usually so expressionless, now looks awfully embarrassed. He coughs into his fist once more, gaze averted elsewhere. Your head tilts slightly at his reaction. *Is he feeling... guilty?*

“Ah—I did not mean to shame you.” You are quick to catch on, and you lean forward in earnest. “My apologies. I just meant to be honest. You see...I have come here with my answer.”

That makes Neuville sweep his gaze back to you. “You have?”

“Yes.” You rise, making your way over to stand before him. Your anxiety has suddenly vanished, and you meet his gaze with an unyielding one of your own. “And I’ve come to say that I do not wish to marry you.”

There is no flicker of shock in the Iudex’s expression—in fact, the look in his eyes tells you that he fully expected this response. “Let us discuss this thoroughly first.”

You do not protest; in fact, you're willing to hear the man out, despite how determined you are to walk out of this office unengaged and unburdened by an airheaded archon's romantic delusions that are, frankly, not your problem, never was your problem, and never shall be your problem.

"Of course." You nod.

Neuvillette had, purposefully, left out the full scope of Wriothesley's plan while bringing this entire situation to light in the garden three nights ago. The timing back then would most certainly not have been ideal, and now is a more appropriate time—but he still feels reluctant to divulge the entirety of the Duke's scheme to you. He sees the resolve shining in your eyes—no matter what he says, you will not be swayed, and he can already see the impending reaction you will elicit the moment he reveals the true depth of the situation; even to him, Wriothesley's plan is outrageous, but Neuvillette knows you will likely be insulted by even the mere suggestion of it.

"*Ahem*," the Iudex clears his throat, searching for the correct words to say. "You see... Wriothesley's plan goes like this."

As you listen, Neuvillette hits you with blow after blow of shock, incredulity and, most of all, *indignation*. Wriothesley's plan is meticulous, infuriatingly brilliant—and one destined for failure.

While Neuvillette lays out the basis of the scheme, you merely stare at him with wide eyes. *This...will never work.*

Finally, after ten minutes of nothing but stunned silence from you and talk from the Iudex, you close your eyes, run one hand over your face, and *laugh*.

Neuvillette is taken utterly aback—*this* was most certainly *not* the reaction he expected. In fact, it was the last one he ever could've guessed. He stares, taking in your bobbing shoulders and wide smile, barely keeping his jaw from going slack.

He silently lets you get it out, understanding just how ridiculous you find the current circumstances, averting his eyes to the fully drawn-up contract before him. Upon it states all the terms and conditions ready to be adapted by your suggestions, and feels that glimmer of hope he'd been clinging onto as a lifeline for the past few days slip weakly from his hold, like a hand gone limp.

Eventually, you calm down, wiping a single tear of laughter from the corner of your left eye. "Oh! Goodness, I haven't had a laugh like that in a while! Oh no, my mascara's now all ruined..."

Neuvillette watches, closely, how you fret about your makeup for approximately five seconds before the grin begins to melt from your lips. Your eyes no longer glitter with amusement, and instead shine with righteous offence.

The Iudex feels his blood chill.

“Chief Justice Neuville.” Subconsciously, he finds himself straightening his shoulders, standing to attention, at the severity of your tone. Gone is the amiable note to your voice, and gone is the shine of understanding in your gaze. Now, in one swift blink, up comes the guarded walls that shutter closed your true sentiments behind your eyes, leaving you inscrutable and ice cold.

“To put it lightly, I am highly insulted.” Your gaze is extremely intense, and Neuville has to will himself to hold it. As the seconds tick by, the harder that feat becomes. “I understand that the Duke is a close confidant of yours, and that you trust him very much, *and* that he is notoriously shrewd...” *But*. The word hangs by a tightening noose in the air at its neck, drawing the oxygen from the Iudex’s lungs.

Abruptly, you let loose a breath that seemed to be one you were holding, and you break gazes with Neuville. He almost sighs in relief. You pinch the bridge of your nose. “However, I see the merit in the plot, but there are too many loopholes—so many, in fact, that we cannot ignore them.” Your stare meets his again, eyes still opaque, but your anger is no longer directed at him. “This will never work. I am no actress. I will not...” you pause and swallow, indecisive, correcting yourself. “...I *would* not have the capability of maintaining such a façade as suggested before Lady Furina. In case you have not noticed, I am not a...*nice* person.”

Neuville almost blurts out how he believes it’s the opposite—you’re just no pushover; a force to be reckoned with—but swiftly opts something else: something much wiser to express. Inhaling a deep breath, he tries to piece together the appropriate, correct words. “It does not take much to convince Furina. And if you please, take a look at this contract.” He takes this opportunity to pick up the paper before him and hand it to you. Reluctantly—warily—you accept it, eyes moving to peruse the words printed neatly by his own hand upon the paper. “On it states the explicit terms and conditions that will apply if this is agreed upon—of course, you are welcome to suggest changes.”

Prenuptial Terms and Conditions for the Marriage Between Party A [Chief Justice Neuville] and Party B [Mademoiselle (Name) (Surname)] .¹

- *Party A and Party B will be required to attend specific social events and appear as a harmonious couple.*
- *Party A will not impose, direct, or involve themselves within any of Party B’s personal affairs, unless Party B authorises their inclusion in such matters.*
- *Party B will not impose, direct, or involve themselves within any of Party A’s personal affairs, unless Party A authorises their inclusion in such matters.*
- *Party A and B are not required to consummate upon the wedding night, and any other acts of sentimentalism is not compulsory; the exception being when needed to act as so*

within the company of others (i.e., Foçalors, public events).

- *Party A will ensure superlative protection of Party B from the public eye; Party B's privacy will be secured to the best of Party A's ability, and Party B shall retain their independence.*
- *Party A and Party B will have separate chambers.*
- *Party A and Party B will reside in the same residence, provided by Party A.*
- *Party A and Party B must settle potential disputes in a sensible, practical manner, and both parties are obligated to listen to each other's reasoning before arriving at a conclusion.²*
- *Party B will remain in charge of their own assets, funds, liabilities, debts and income. Party A has no right to interfere, unless authorised to do so by Party B.*
- *Party A will remain in charge of their own assets, funds, liabilities, debts and income. Party B has no right to interfere, unless authorised to do so by Party A.*
- *The matrimonial contract between Party A and B will expire twelve (12) months subsequent to the signing of the agreement, unless renewed upon mutual assent by both parties.*
- *If either Party A or Party B develop romantic sentiments for their corresponding party, and the feelings are nonreciprocal, Party A or Party B is required to abstain from indulging their correlating party of such emotions, before and after the contract ends.³*
- *Interactions between Party A and Party B are to be kept formal and businesslike, unless both parties mutually agree to a more relaxed relationship.*

Signed: Chief Justice Neuville

Date: 16/04/xx

Signed:

Date:

With pursed lips, you glance down to read the footnotes neatly written out at the bottom of the page:

¹ *Terms and Conditions are subject to change .*

² *Failure to do so will result in a formal divorce / termination of contract .*

³ *Feelings are to be kept strictly platonic .*

You nod your approval, extending your arm to hand back the paper to the Iudex. “These are all very reasonable. In fact, much of what is written here were the conditions I myself was going to suggest.” You appreciate the fact that he likely took such things into great consideration and penned them down for your sake—and his, as all conditions went both ways and are beneficial to both of you.

Now, you do not have to worry about him catching feelings, nor you, and you are glad to see him having no intent to meddle within your personal and financial affairs. You two would be married legally under the jurisdiction and live in the same home, but you would continue to live out your days as acquaintances.

Nevertheless, you are still extremely reluctant to agree to marry him. What if you fall in love with another man during your marriage? That’s one thing—but what if said metaphorical man reciprocated your feelings? If you agree to this, you have to stick by Neuvillette’s side for *one entire year*, tending to the petulant Hydro Archon’s beck and call and placating her monomania with the Chief Justice’s love life, and even attend *public events* just to keep up appearances—all the while being helpless in pursuing your (imaginary) potential love interest.

You already feel the headache setting in at the thought of it.

That, *and* Wriothesley’s plan. Part of it—the acting aspect—is already mapped out on the contract, but there are other things to consider.

You look at Neuvillette, who is also rereading the contract he himself had written up and probably knows what’s on it like the back of his hand, and feel a wash of sympathy for him. Is it just you, or does he look particularly fatigued? His eyes droop down and the beginnings of dark circles are forming underneath his eyelids. *He must be under insurmountable pressure from her Her Annoyance*. You’d come up with quite a few colourful nicknames for the Archon you’re now in the sights of. *Should I...?*

You really don’t want to, but the changes that will occur in your day-to-day routine doesn’t appear to be very significant if you *do* agree to this. The Iudex is a good man, and you know he is fiercely particular about maintaining agreements and making sure this is seen to till the end. He is honest, a gentleman, and would never treat you poorly. You understand Neuvillette

to be a reliable man, and he will stick to the contract's regulations with utmost faith and will hold to his word.

You purse your lips.

You intended to leave this place without a ring on your finger and without reason to return. However, you're being swayed by this man's beseeching—and, dare you say it, *adorable*—gaze, and his perfectly reasonable terms.

I won't have to worry about money again if I marry him, you think, still weighing the options, feeling a bit bad at your train of thought. You'd never use this man for his position and wealth, and, yet, here you are, already considering how comfortable the next year will be. And if he doesn't stop staring at me like that, I'm sure to cave!

“...You will hold fast to each and every condition on that paper?” You already know he will, but you ask him anyway, just to hear it from him.

Seeing his chance, Neuville hastily nods, pointing towards his signature and the date of signing on the contract. “Of course. However, if you agree to this...will you?”

You hold back a pleased smile, glad he is also making sure you answer your own question in kind. “Of course.”

Unable to discern any other way out of this entire fiasco, you accept the inked quill he holds out to you, leaning forward to scrawl your signature and the date on the contract.

There's no going back after this . You hand Neuville back the pen, noting his relaxed shoulders and faint smile. He looks relieved. I'm glad I am of some help.

“Thank you *very* much for your assistance, Mademoiselle [Name].” He then opens up a desk drawer and takes out a small navy-blue box. You instantly recognise it. “If you are alright with it, as we are now, essentially, engaged...”

“Yes, of course.” You nod and hold out your left hand, allowing him to take out the ring and slip it onto your finger. He gently takes hold of your hand, grip featherlight, and places the ring onto the corresponding digit.

The ring is nothing remarkable, but its small precious stone at the centre, evidently pure diamond, sparkles exquisitely against the light.

That makes you realise how the looming clouds that once blotted out the sun are traceless now; sunlight streaming in through the huge window behind Neuville's desk.

“Did you pick out the ring?”

“I did. Do you like it?”

You give him a small, thankful smile. “I do. It's lovely. I'm glad my future husband has taste in such aspects.”

You're unsure if it was just a trick of the light or you embarrassed him, but you could've sworn there was the lightest dusting of pink blooming across the Chief Justice's cheeks. He averts his gaze, eliciting a feeble chuckle. "I'm glad. I had a feeling you'd prefer something more simplistic."

"You thought correctly." The ring fits your finger perfectly. Clutching your purse at your front, you voice the next pertinent query. "When will the wedding be held?"

"I shall discuss with Furina the date—you are also welcome to attend the meeting as well." Neuville places the contract in a folder safely. "Take this chance to meet Furina and begin your act. Would you like a copy of the contract?"

"Yes, please," you reply. Inwardly, you begin mulling over just how you're going to put up a convincing front for the Hydro Archon. If you thought Wriothesley was an idiot, you would've said his scheme was all over the place—which it is, really—but right now, you're determined to make it work. *I honestly wouldn't put it past her to order me to marry him, anyway.* You eye the Iudex and him busily shuffling through some paperwork. *And she could throw me into the Fortress of Meropide if I refused. Besides, it's not like I'm marrying a gremlin.* In fact, quite the opposite. Neuville has a most attractive build and stunning visuals. He's *inhumanly* beautiful—which would make sense, as most of the common people of Fontaine are sure he is not.

You glance at the clock on the wall—it's been almost an hour. You've a dinner date with Navia at five—her way of offering her gratitude for taking care of her when she was wasted at the ball—and you'd best head off and get ready.

"Well, I believe that settles all that was needed to be discussed today." You dip into a curtsy, preparing to take your leave.

"Ah, of course, and once again, thank you." Neuville pauses in flipping through a worn brown-coloured binder and looks up at you. "Truly, thank you. You've saved me an enormous headache. I am forever indebted to you."

"Yes, you *are* quite the poetic chap, aren't you?" You can't resist an amused smile now. "And please don't lose sleep over it, Neuville. You need only send me a letter of our next meeting and I shall arrive. Good day."

As he expresses his farewells and you curtsy once more, you turn to head out, eager for some fresh air.

I really wonder how Navia will react to me suddenly turning up engaged? You're sure she'll make a huge, overjoyed fuss.

And somehow, even though everything did not go as planned at all, you don't feel unhappy.

In fact, you feel *elated*.

this one was really fun to write 🤗 updates will be a bit slower now as over the next few weeks I've got end-of-year exams and I need to study 😊

anyway, if you'd like to read this on tumblr, please click [here](#). I post first on tumblr. thank you for reading!

— véhémence

Chapter Summary

two people under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As predicted, Navia wastes no time in barraging you with questions the moment she spots the ring.

You take a seat before her, at the selected table in Hotel Debord, thanking the waiter for the menus and half-forgetting about the very obvious new addition to your hand.

Something Navia, having caught a glimmer of something in her peripheral, immediately recognises over the top of her menu.

“[Name], what is that on your finger?” She lowers the menu and eyes the ring closely—and before you can inform her of what it is, the realisation clicks and Navia gasps in shock.

“Is that an *engagement* ring?!” You fully expected this reaction, and you calmly close the menu, place it on the table before you, and hold up your right hand. “Correct. Let’s just say your escapades at the ball were... *somewhat* successful.”

Navia’s baby blue eyes are blown wide, mouth agape, the menu limp in her hands. “N...No way, it *worked*?! You finally found a husband??”

You give her a small smile, humourless. “Yes, Navia. I have.”

“Who?” She seems oblivious to the heads being turned and disapproving stares being shot your way throughout the restaurant, and you pat her hand to calm her down. “Lower your voice, Navia. And, well...I can’t say just yet.”

Neuvillette hadn’t told you it would be okay to indulge anyone of your engagement to him—in fact, you had forgotten to ask. So, until the meeting with the Hydro Archon and the wedding date set, you feel it’s best to keep quiet at present. “I will tell you once the wedding date has been agreed upon.”

Navia opens her mouth, preparing to protest, before clicking it shut and slumping back into her chair. “I already have a good idea who it is, anyway.” She then narrows her eyes at you, a

small smirk lifting the left corner of her mouth. “Besides, you *did* dance with him.”

You purse your lips subtly, slightly displeased at her perceptiveness (classic Navia) before feigning an insouciant shrug. “Who knows. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“*Well*,” she triumphantly huffs, leaning forward, beaming. “To celebrate, how about we order today’s special? It’s lasagna.”

“Mm, that sounds nice,” you hum in agreement, eyes scanning the list of entrées, desserts and drinks. “What will you get for a drink? I’m in the mood for the bourgogne pinot noir.”

“No champagne tonight?” Navia raises an amused brow at you from over the top of her menu. You offer a half-grin in return. She then continues to ponder her choice of beverage. “Hm...I’ll get the classic dandelion wine—and it says here it’s been imported all the way from Mondstadt, and aged fairly well too.”

“Alrighty, then.” You turn to raise your hand to summon the waiter, only to notice the commotion occurring two tables away.

“*Garçon!*” Bellows a pot-bellied, ruddy-faced man, snapping his fingers and glaring vehemently at the waiter presently scrambling over for their table. “Goodness, I’ve been waiting for *ten* minutes for you to take our orders! Where is the stellar service I am so used to here?”

“*Je suis vraiment désolée, monsieur*,” apologises the flushed waiter, seemingly too flustered to reply in the Common Tongue. Your brows furrow in disapproval for the man’s—who’s presumably a noble, considering his hauteur and sheer rudeness towards the server—attitude, particularly offended at his reference to the boy as ‘*garçon*’. *Isn’t it really outdated nowadays to call a waiter that?*

“You see, I am the only waiter available for a shift this evening—”

“I’ve no care for who’s working when, boy! Just hurry up and take our order, before we request to see your superior!”

Immediately, he clambers to ready his notepad, carefully avoiding the stares of the other customers around. “*Bien sûr, monsieur*.”

Lips pursed in distaste, you make a mental note to leave a generous tip for the young man later, displeased at the entitled noble’s actions.

“Well, that was a small spectacle; who knew nobles still treated servants that way?” Navia shakes her head. “I feel sorry for that kid.”

“As do I,” you agree. You’ve begun to find yourself constantly fiddling with the ring; twisting it around with your thumb, taking it on and off when you have your hands clasped together, the like. The feeling of having such a band on your ring finger—something you’d never have even dreamed of experiencing—is almost unnervingly strange.

Pouring some ice-cold water from the jug previously provided for you once you'd both sat down, Navia takes a sip and shoots you a devious grin. *Here we go* . “Now, anything in mind for potential bridesmaids and decorations?”

All of that will likely be up to Lady Furina . Your expression is utterly blank, almost disapproving. “Navia, I got engaged *today*.” *And not intentionally, either*. “In fact, only mere hours ago. You are getting a bit *too* excited.”

“But—this is *history* in the making, [Name]!” Navia insists, looking at you incredulously, as if to say, *how are you so unbothered by all this??* “*You’re* getting married—and if it’s to who I think it is, then this really *will* be history!”

You shake your head, sighing almost long-sufferingly, twisting your ring around on your finger upon your lap. “I suppose so. But this really isn’t such a big deal, Navia.” *Besides, it’s only for one year* . However, you keep your lips carefully sealed shut.

Navia finally appears to give up, slumping into one hand upon her cheek and rolling her eyes. “You’re absolutely no fun. I feel awful for the man you’re to marry.”

You lift your brows amusedly. “You wound me, Navia. It’s terribly funny how the person talking about marriage and how unfortunate her friend’s future husband is is unengaged herself.”

“Well—I just haven’t found the right person yet, and I doubt I shall,” Navia huffs. “But you’re going to need a walking stick soon, considering how old *you* are and how you’ve *just* gotten betrothed.”

“*Walking stick?*” Laughter bubbles up, and you let loose a short chuckle, trying your best to look utterly unamused. “Goodness, have you no mercy on such a poor, innocent old lady such as myself? Were you never taught to respect your elders? I guess it’s now up to me to presume the role of grandmother in your life and round up all potential prospects for her dearest granddaughter.”

“Oh, no, please—someone, save me!” Navia dramatically slaps a hand to her forehead and pretends to faint. “I am too young to be chained to a man—grandmother, *surely* you understand? Oh, please, you *mustn’t*.”

“Hmm...” you tap your chin in mock-thought, acting as if truly considering it. “Child, surely *you* understand just how beneficial marrying a rich man is? I’ll be comfortable—I mean, *you’ll* be comfortable for the rest of your life, dear.”

“I’d rather dive into a pool full of Primordial Seawater than marry a man, grandmother.” Navia shakes her head and pretends to stifle a sob, delicately wiping at the edges of her eyes. “You’re so cruel. You never have my best interests in mind!”

It’s becoming very hard not to snort in laughter. “Goodness, Navia—you should become a theatre actor, or star in an opera.” You cough into your hand to calm the laughter threatening to burst. “Ahem, I’m sure you’ll be able to take your pick of all those handsome performers up for grabs.”

The rest of the evening is spent in jest and light-hearted laughter from the both of you, allowing you to momentarily forget about the letter you are now awaiting from the Chief Justice.

A letter that will be the final step in setting your fate for the next twelve months in stone.

For an entire week, Chief Justice Neuville left you gnawing at your fingernails. With every day that passed—from Wednesday night to the next Friday, you received no letter from him. Just sheer radio silence.

You understand perfectly well just how busy of a man he is. Over the past two weeks, there have been three trials—all ones that made the headlines of the Steambird, ones where there were long downpours subsequent.

So, to bear with the suspense and try to get your mind off of the stressful engagement, you occupied yourself with your job as a seamstress at Chioriya Boutique in downtown Fontaine, where you're in charge of sewing on the embellishments upon the tailored garments. You're nimble with a needle, and although not your ideal career choice in mind, the pay is good, and if you ever leave, the boutique's name upon your resumé as a reference would be advantageous.

Quitting your job once you marry Neuville would be pure stupidity. Due to your limited options from your young years in the Fleuve Cendre and back-and-forths from Poisson, what education you did have did not open many doors for your future. Reading and writing and basic arithmetic are the boundaries leaving you stranded; your dreams of entering the Akademiya when you were a naïve teen were a mere pipe dream in the face of adulthood and reality.

That is another thing you are not able to, for the life of you, understand about Neuville and why he selected you as his wife in general, if you put aside the whole ball fiasco. He was sure to have done a background check on you, and would've seen the life you once led.

A mother running a small but growing illegal conglomerate, often throwing you and your older brother into the dangerous mix of her dirty dealings with shady clients, and an upbringing where there was never enough food in your stomach.

Your mother was eventually found out for her crimes and was to be sentenced, but she swallowed a cyanide pill before she could stand trial, taking the cowardly route out. This left you, a small twelve-year-old, and a seventeen-year-old elder brother alone, left to fend for yourselves. You had no extended family you knew of to take you in. It was then up to your brother to raise you.

Forced to mature into an adult as a child, maybe it contributed towards your more cynical outlook upon life, and your initial reluctance to marry. Navia, having grown up and working in the same environment your childhood was based within, is someone you'd been able to relate to upon first meeting, therefore sparking your current strong friendship with her. You did not, however, bargain that being dragged along to balls and pushed into blind dates would be part of the package.

That being said, considering your background and the dark roots from your parents—mother especially—it was quite unfathomable to you that Neuville still intends to follow through with the wedding. Most people would shy away from a person of your background, despite not having any illegal dealings yourself.

You never would've expected for the hand life dealt you would dump you into this whole predicament, however.

Presently, you are just adding the finishing touches to one of Chiori's best pieces yet when a Melusine arrives at the front entrance.

Chiori had previously stepped out of the boutique to receive her order of three crates of materials, leaving you to welcome and see to customers.

Hearing the front door's bell chime, you stabbed the needle you were just sewing with into the pin cushion, stepping out from behind the curtain and for the counter. Seeing the Melusine, you offer her a small, accommodating smile. "Welcome, Miss. How may I help you?"

"Are you Mademoiselle [Name]?" The little creature instantly gets to the point, outstretching her little arms toward you, an envelope clutched within her paws. "You have a letter addressed to you from Monsieur Neuville."

Oh no, here it is, you gulp, before forcing yourself to nod and step forward. "Thank you, Liath." You quickly sweep your gaze over her name tag, bending down to receive the letter from her. "Tell His Honour that I will write back to him presently."

"Of course." Liath nods, before turning to toddle out. "Have a lovely rest of your day, Mademoiselle."

Waving a goodbye, you watch as the Melusine quickly heads off to her next location before tearing open the letter, noting the seal of the Palais Mermonia, officiating its genuinity.

Pulling the letter out, you quickly read over the neat handwriting of Chief Justice Neuville.

To Mademoiselle [Name],

I hope this letter finds you well. Please forgive me for my sudden silence for the past week; I have been especially busy and have only just found the time within my schedule to write this letter and set the date for the meeting.

I shall keep this short and sweet, as to not take up too much of your time. Four days from now, on Tuesday at 11AM, we shall meet with Lady Furina within her personal parlour at the Palais Mermonia to discuss wedding arrangements. Please dress formally, as she is quite particular about these things, and it is not time to begin your act just yet. It is imperative that you make a good impression on her upon the meeting.

Again, I sincerely apologise for this entire debacle you have been forced into. No amount of scolding on my part was able to sway our dearest Archon. As you likely have already gathered, she is a hot-headed girl and is not one to acquiesce once her mind is determinedly set upon something.

Please enjoy the rest of your week.

Chief Justice Neuville.

With dull resolve, you fold the letter back into its original state and slip it into the envelope, shoulders slumping in defeat. You'd found yourself hoping somewhat that his letter would say this situation has been called off, that you would be free, and soon be required to return the ring to him. However, you are, once again, proven wrong, and your spirits have fallen.

You do not hate Neuville. In fact, you're not sure *what* you feel about him, exactly. You don't really have an opinion about him, in all honesty. You know for sure that you respect him, and that he has the looks any woman in every possible region would kill to have as a husband, but you're merely indifferent. You are glad to see that he appears to feel the same about you, therefore showing no future bumps in the road for the next twelve months.

That evening, you went out to grocery shop, for possibly the final time. The evening markets in the less-crowded streets of the Court of Fontaine are always more peaceful than the midday stalls and vendors, despite the produce being less fresh. However, you know what to pick, for your eye for such things is sharp, and you click your apartment door shut behind you, keys jingling in your hand as you lock up your residence.

You have never been a people-person, opting to remain on the sidelines as more of a wallflower than a socialite. You've never attracted people to you, and have never wished to. Therefore, quieter areas are more your *forté*, which explains your preference to shop in the evenings and remain within your home on weekends.

You've only ever attended a handful of balls and parties. It seems, however—you think with a sigh—that that will change very soon.

Why must Neuville appeal to the public for this? You slightly shake your head to yourself, adjusting your basket on your arm. He has never been a communal person. Marriage is no small deal, sure, but why must he rearrange his lifestyle for an immature archon?

The stars are out, barely visible due to the light pollution of the city. Faintly, they twinkle, the night sky clear for once, unlike its usual overcast look that has been frequent over the past week.

You would like to take a stroll on the beach, as the evening air is sure to be fresh and sweet upon the lungs, but you turn away and set your mind to your present mission before you let yourself wander.

What should I wear on Tuesday? You mull, selecting the roundest, cleanest-of-blemishes bulle fruits you can find, handing over the Mora to the stall clerk before moving onto to the next vendor's other options of produce. *I have almost nothing that isn't ball wear. And those are only two dresses.*

You think about wearing the same dress you had to the meeting with Neuvillette last week, before discarding the thought. *No. I'll have to find something else. Will my wedding dress be tailored for me?*

You laugh to yourself silently at the thought of having to use the same boutique you work at for your own wedding dress. *Who knew this day would ever come?*

The irony of the situation almost makes you laugh aloud, but you keep that for the pillow later, sure the emotion will melt into self-pity and thus turn into tears. Although not much of a crier, you're feeling pretty lousy, and the sensation does not appear to want to dissipate any time soon.

However, you're going to take everything as it comes and endure it.

Besides, it's only for a year.

. . . .

"Welcome, Mademoiselle," a female servant curtsies to you, before sweeping a hand in the direction of the hallway behind her, in the opposite direction of where you are used to heading, that is towards Neuvillette's office. "You're right on time. The Lady and His Honour are expecting you."

Before you can answer, she swiftly turns around and begins to lead you down the hall, you following silently, unsurely, behind.

You managed to find a dress formal enough and befitting of the occasion, after hours of throwing your wardrobe and dresser drawers to bits. However, currently, you are the picture-perfect embodiment of your usual stoic, dignified self; one purposefully curated to intimidate others, and you have no sense of hesitation to use such tactics on the Hydro Archon.

It is not time to begin your act yet, as the Chief Justice had written in the letter that is now ashes in the fireplace.

Primly, you nod your farewell to the maid as she opens the door, steps aside after announcing your presence, and leaves. She shuts the door after you, and you turn to the two figures seated in two chairs before a lovely coffee table, where all kinds of desserts and delicacies are laden upon the display trays in the middle of the circular tabletop.

There Neuvillette is, eyes upon you as you first address the Hydro Archon.

"My lady, it is of the utmost honour of mine to be invited to this small gathering today."

You internally note how the Iudex and Archon's colour palettes of blues and whites almost comically match, something you can tell is common, and unintentional. His imposing, broad-shouldered figure compared to her slim, meeker frame is an amusing sight, especially given her boisterous persona and his placid aura.

"Please, there is no need for the flattery!" You are surprised at how kind Lady Furina sounds; her smile being one bright and a far cry from the view famous in the Opera Epiclese when she watches a trial or play with amusement.

However, there is still something off about her smile. It's wide and sunny and joyful, but the glint in her eyes is mischievous. Like she has some kind of plan, and it's all falling into place at her feet *very* nicely.

You quickly take a seat to Neuville's right, before Furina. Her smile has not faltered in the slightest, and she swiftly places a plate with a slice of a three-layered cake upon it before you. Then, she picks up the teapot and delicately pours the steaming liquid into your empty teacup.

The entire time, you stare at her, then at the cake, and at the tea, speechless. She plops herself back down upon her own chair, clasping her hands together, sighing triumphantly. "Oh, my, how *excited* I've been for this moment!"

You glance uncertainly at Neuville, who seems awfully interested in the patternless ceramic of his own teacup. Seeing how he is uninclined to come to your aid about her uncharacteristic behaviour, you purse your lips and bow your head in a display of polite gratitude, lifting your cup to your lips. "Thank you kindly for your hospitality, Lady Furina." You force the bland liquid down your throat. *Ugh, I really can't stand tea without sugar.* However, you do not reach for the small tongs to place two sugar cubes into your tea, opting to place it down upon its saucer with a small *clink* instead. "Now, I believe there is a reason of the utmost importance we are here for today."

"Straight to the point! I like it!" She claps her hands, wiggling in her seat like an excited child. You glance at Neuville once more, who now is fidgeting with his cake fork at his plate's side, staring with the utmost absorption at its movements. Annoyed, you look back to Furina, forcing your lips up into a small, but seemingly happy, smile. Furina continues on before you can speak again. "Well, then. You both have kicked up *quite* the fuss amongst the commoners and the tabloids. I must say, I am absolutely *delighted*. To think that Chief Justice Neuville, the most eligible bachelor in the country and still unmarried, has *finally* danced with a woman and found supposed romance? Oh, I can just *see* all the playwrights being written in your memory for generations to come!"

The desserts look divine, but right now, taking a bite would surely make you heave your breakfast up. *When will you help me out here, Neuville!* You have half a mind to kick his shin under the table, foot twitching. Frustration courses throughout your veins, but you keep your expression utterly unreadable, save for the subtle glares you occasionally shoot the Iudex's way. "That may be a bit of an overstatement," you force out a chuckle, bringing your teacup to your mouth, feigning a sip, almost unable to stomach the scent. "It's not something I can see Neuville approving." *Shall we put you on the spot and make you talk, Chief Justice?*

Neuvillette *now* decides to clear his throat, intervening. “Ahem, yes, quite right.” Scrutinising his teacup and adjusting his cake fork doesn’t appear to be very fascinating anymore, as he finally straightens and pushes his cup and saucer away from him. He throws a glance in your direction, amethyst hues flickering with incertitude. *Ah, he is just as diffident as I.* You pick up your own cake fork and stab it into the dessert before you, moving it to your mouth so you’re too occupied to talk, now leaving Neuvillette to shoulder the burden of chatting with (the admittedly insufferable) Lady Furina. “I do not think it is very ethical to have such a fanciful view on this arrangement, dear Furina.” Neuvillette’s tone is stop-and-start, clearly searching frantically for the correct words. “Understand that this ordeal was initially *your* idea, not willingly followed through with by neither Mademoiselle [Name] here nor I.”

“Oh, please, will you *ever* give up on that argument, Neuvillette?” Furina groans and slumps in her chair childishly, huffing. “It’s not going to work. I’ve arranged this for your own good —”

“But what about hers?” Neuvillette interjects, voice no longer hesitant, now stern and sharp. “Did you ever take into consideration how the secondary party involved would feel?”

You blink, beginning to feel awkward. *Are they ... fighting?* Something tells you this is not an uncommon occurrence.

Furina seems undeterred by his severe tone and look, for she reciprocates with one on par to his own. “I have *both* of your best interests in mind, believe you me.” She then shoots a stony look in *your* direction, as if you’re the one who initiated the squabble. “Becoming your wife would be so beneficial for her, the pros outweigh the cons.” *Why are they talking as if I’m not here?* “And you’d finally have the lifelong companion you so need. *Et voilà*, everyone is happy.”

“Not so, Furina.” Neuvillette crosses his arms. “You are forgetting that she is morta—”

“Alright, I’ve heard enough.” You had picked up your teacup previously, trying to find something to occupy yourself with while stuck awkwardly in the middle of an argument that had an uncanny resemblance to a father-daughter quarrel, now clattering it down upon the saucer sharply. You stare coldly at both of them. “Feuding over this is futile. I believe I have the right to say something, and...” you pointedly gaze at the Hydro Archon. “If this displeases either one of you, I am more than inclined to hire a lawyer and take this to court.”

“That would be highly unnecessary.” Neuvillette appears to join forces with you, tight-lipped. He mirrors your frigid stare towards Furina. “This will be resolved here, now, between the three of us and no other.”

Seeing how there would be no getting through or refuting both of your statements, Furina huffed and waved a dismissive hand. “Whatever. Either way, what I say goes. *You* are both under orders to marry, and that is final.”

You wish you could feel that same reassurance you had when Neuvillette told you her obsession with his married life would die down eventually—at least, by the end of an entire year—however, that feeling is now nonexistent. Now, you are dreading the rest of this meeting, and the rest of the year.

“Lady Furina, may I ask you a question?” Politely, you smooth your features and reduce the heat of your glare, as to make her relax and thus lower her guard, thinking that you now see where she is coming from. And the tactic works, for her tense posture loosens and she nods. “Of course, go ahead.”

“What, exactly, makes you so determined to make Monsieur Neuville here feel what ‘love’ is in a marital relationship?”

Furina does not appear to have expected that particular question—and neither did Neuville. He snaps his head around to look at you, lips parted in shock. Furina’s eyes bug out of her head, and you sit there patiently, awaiting her answer expectantly.

“W-Well—” she stutters, heterochromatic eyes flitting about the room uncertainly. “You see, I, um...”

She falls silent, coming up with nothing. Disappointed with how you’ve essentially been proven correct, you lean forward toward the table, deadly serious. “Lady Furina, if you do not give either of us a logical reason for your, frankly bizarre, motivations towards Neuville and I and this ‘marriage’, I believe we thus have every right to resist your orders.”

I should’ve been a lawyer, you internally curse, wishing you had the sufficient legal knowledge to tear her resolve down.

“Allow me to jog your memory, Neuville,” Furina suddenly speaks up, lips pursed. “Two weeks ago, I quoted section 442 from the *Codex Egerius*, under the Fontainian Legislation.” She tilted her chin up severely. “‘*The presiding Hydro Archon has full legal dispensation to decree a living citizen of Fontaine into coercion with her orders, and said citizen is obligated to adhere*’. Does that ring a bell?”

What? You’re not liking where this is starting to go, at all. You know that she has a point—one that will make your freedom a lost cause.

“...I do.” You turn to Neuville, shocked, dread making your blood pound. *Dammit, the little weasel — she’s purposely put him on the spot! And he can’t lie about it!* Neuville looks extremely conflicted, a muscle in his strong jaw flexing an irregular, irresolute rhythm. He says nothing more.

“Then you’ll surely understand when I say this.” Turning to you, she holds one dainty finger in the air, posture ramrod straight. “Mademoiselle [Name], I order you to marry Chief Justice Neuville.”

Blinking, your mouth opens and closes like a fish in shock, while Neuville’s expression turns deadly. “Furina!”

“You’ve left me no choice.” She pierces the Iudex with a narrow-eyed, vehement glare. “You *will* fall in love. That is an order. How else are you to be happy and stop moping all the time?”

“I do not *mope*.” Your shock heightens when a bright, humiliated flush mixed with outrage blooms across the Chief Justice’s cheeks, eyes storming with fury. “How rude of you. You may be the Hydro Archon, but that does not give you the right to impose on my personal life and feelings! Nor hers!”

You feel extremely frightened—for Furina’s sake. No one has *ever* seen the Iudex so infuriated—there have been moments in court when defendants and the audience grow too rowdy after multiple orders from him to quiet down, but never to *this* extent. Although he is an intimidating man in general, you now know he is not one to anger easily, for he is slow to it—but when his ire *is* stoked, it is a white-hot blaze.

However, although his fury is scorching, it is a quiet type of wrath. Such is clear now, where he silently sits in his chair, fists clenched tightly upon the tabletop, a vein beginning to bulge in his forehead, glare murderous. You’re amazed at how resilient Furina is to it—and then, you realise with a shudder—she likely has pushed his buttons like this *many* times, so much so she is used to it.

You know Neuvillette will not raise a hand to her. In fact, you can’t see him doing that to anyone. However, you’ve already broken out into a cold sweat. *Goodness, I must never get on this side of him.*

“I just want you to be *happy*!” She exclaims in answer, the argument quickly beginning to get well out of hand. “Is that so hard to understand? You need a wife! Someone to take care of, and someone to take care of *you*—!”

“*Enough!*” You slam a palm down on the table, cutlery rattling violently in answer, jumping from your seat. Neuvillette visibly flinches, abruptly yanked from his momentary bout of anger, turning to you. His gaze softens, and you almost fall over your words at how your heart stutters in response to the look. Furina, meanwhile, quietens instantly at your order, cheeks flushed and almost out of breath. You compose yourself and sling your purse strap over your shoulder, more than eager and ready to leave. “Have I not already said that fighting is pointless? Stop squabbling like children, both of you!” You’ve almost forgotten how your tone and words could very well end you up in the Fortress of Meropide. With a glacial glare, you pin Furina to her seat, jaw clenched. “I will marry him. Does that satisfy you? Will you leave him—*and* me—alone, now?”

“Hold on, [Name]—” You cut Neuvillette’s quiet words off, redirecting your glower towards him and trying your best to ignore his imploring stare that is oh-so-soft and easy to fall into, steeling your resolve. “No. I won’t hear another word. I am quite offended by today’s events.” You turn and begin walking towards the door. “Neuvillette, send me a letter of when we are to be married. I want it in a registry office. No ceremony.” You know this is exactly what Furina wouldn’t want, so you silence her attempts at protesting with another unsparing glare. “You owe me— *us* —that much, Lady Furina.”

You leave no room for a reply from either of them, swivelling around once more and wrenching open the door, utterly outraged. The only thing on your mind right now is getting home, letting you scream into your pillow and relax your frayed nerves freely.

It poured relentlessly for the rest of that day. It suited you quite fine, considering its correspondence with your bitter feelings. However, three glasses of wine did nothing to expel the image of Neuville's desperate, beseeching stare. The look made your chest tighten, and you hated it.


Who knew the ever-expressionless Chief Justice could manage such a look?

With the image plaguing your mind for the rest of the night, you rested fitfully, knowing that you had just agreed to something that would likely alter the course of your life forever, not for just twelve months.

And something tells you nothing will go according to plan. Everything will go awry.

if you'd like to read this on tumblr, please click [here](#). I post first on there. tysm for reading!

Chapter End Notes

just realised that is actually where you put your end-of-chapter notes...haha. anyways, super sorry for such a late upload, I've got one more exam to go and then im done!! hope you enjoyed this chapter <3 im not happy with it at all, but here we are. better than nothing, I suppose! until next time 

— ciel en pleurs

Chapter Summary

two people under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Philosophy. One of the foundations for humankind, something that has existed since the first man walked the earth. Something that shapes the mind, forms morals and forges one's opinions, preferences and beliefs.

Once, when you were no more than seven, you met a kindly, quiet old man named Elias when you lived in the Fleuve Cendre. You called him uncle, under his insistence. Now, thinking back, you amusedly see him as somewhat of a philosopher. For he had told you one old saying that has simply stuck with you ever since, and partly moulded you into the woman you are today.

Do not disturb yourself by imagining your entire life at once.

He also preached stoicism. Once, he had told you to never act on impulse—a common piece of advice, but his elaboration upon it made it exponentially more profound than just a few fleeting words.

“It's best to always take a step back if it means three steps forward later on,” he'd said, weaving a straw hat to pass the time. Uncle Elias had arthritis in his knee joints, restricting his walking greatly. He always seemed content to just sit and whittle away the day, anyway, and offer a few morsels of advice from his 'asinine youth'—his words, not yours. “Know when to concede. Know when to be silent. Observe, keep watch of others, learn from their mistakes before you make the same ones.” He'd selected a piece of straw, eyeing it, before deeming it unfit to weave into the hat, throwing it to the ground. “Of course, you'll make mistakes all the same, but just keep everyone at arm's length. Especially with those dreams of getting into the Akademiya of yours, girl. My sister went there fifty years ago. She said it's utterly rotten to the core. Corrupt.”

Of course, in the end, you never went to Sumeru and to Teyvat's most renowned university. You stayed in Fontaine, whiling away your youth with needles and yarn, hopping from boutique to boutique. Nothing in your life had turned out the way you planned, as Uncle Elias said was likely to happen.

Now, you can see why he said to never ‘disturb yourself by imagining your entire life at once’. “*You can’t predict the future, nor can you understand it, so don’t bother trying to work out. Life never goes anyone’s way. That’s why it’s called ‘life’.*”

Uncle Elias got you up on your feet as a kid, and pointed you in the right direction for a little while. When he died of pneumonia, you were left on your own. As a final parting gift, he left you a small, crudely-written letter and jar of pickled onions. You, seventeen at the time, found it an exceptionally humorous present, but it truly was delicious. However, the letter held something more precious.

Im not good at writing. Thats why my grammer is a bit off. Anyway, im probably dead if your reading this. Just wanted to say one last thing to ya, kiddo.

You have a good head on your shoulders. Your smart. Youll get through life. Just remeber one thing—don’t let others push you around and hold to your beliefs. Sounds like something any old man would say, but i mean it. Vouloir, c’est pouvoir.

And that was it. Uncle Elias, the only true parental figure you ever had in your life, was dead and gone, but he had essentially bequeathed his legacy to you. And you accepted it; you carried it. His morals that he’d adopted throughout his long, trial-filled life had been passed onto you, and helped you greatly through maturing and becoming an independent, functioning adult woman.

However, one principle you yourself had come to learn was that the so-called joyous, life-changing concept of ‘love’ is a fickle, treacherous thing. Never to be trusted, never to be relied on.

The man you once loved tried to kill you. Now you understand how swift to change—how *deceitful* , such a ‘feeling’ can be. How fleeting, transient and cursory it is.

And how lasting it is.

You were going to marry the man who tried to kill you. He was the very one who put that ring on your finger with such a *loving* smile on his face. You had no fortune, nothing of note to give—except your heart and soul, and he gladly took that and crushed it underfoot.

He tried to kill you. He tried to kill you. *He tried to kill you.*

That was years ago now. You like to think you’ve moved on, but the scars he left were too deep to scab over quickly. Which explains your primary hesitance to marry the Chief Justice.

You had one foot and one foot out of the door, ready to bolt at any given moment. Now, you’ve been yanked inside fully by the Hydro Archon, the door shut behind you, locked and sealed, and no visible way out for the next twelve months.

I never should’ve agreed to go to the ball with Navia. What an utter fool I am.

It’s clear that Neuville is a man vastly different from your vile ex-fiancé, but you’re never going to allow him to tear down your walls. No matter how gentle those eyes of his are, no

matter how soft-spoken he may be. One dreadful experience from what you thought was also a soft-spoken, gentle-eyed man is more than enough to set your resolve in stone.

You stare at the second engagement ring to ever sit on your finger blankly. The first one, you were overjoyed to see; the second one, you're progressively growing to detest more with each day that passes.

Princess Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, is offered up a sacrifice for the Minotaur's labyrinth; finds and assists Theseus in escape—before he abandons her while she is sleeping. The myth has multiple versions, none confirmed to be the original one—but it's a story you can almost relate to. Despite the two being in love, he abandons her while she is sleeping, vulnerable—a prime moment for Dionysus to discover her and become enamoured.

Although your life was a bit different—it was essentially the same. Your lover abandoned you after an unsuccessful attempt at killing you, leaving you stranded. Neuville could never be considered as Dionysus—he did not save you. You met him years later. But it feels as if you've been finally offered a helping hand after years of being forsaken, of being deserted—and pulled from the seas, tasting fresh air again and finally feeling the sun's warm rays kiss your face.

Have you been saved? Or have you been hoodwinked—fooled into that same little fatuous fairy tale you once believed in? Duped into believing maybe there is someone who could place a ring on your finger with a genuine smile? Swindled into letting that warm gaze plague your mind again, leaving you sleepless?

Or are you Icarus, the one so blinded by the sun's beauty, so eager to touch it and have a taste of its love for himself; one so foolish as to forget his wings are made of mere wax, so witless with adoration he did not even acknowledge his end until he crashed into it, sinking into those same depths you once drowned within?

Ah, but you forget this is a mere arrangement—by no means intentional, and could never become something *true*. Something *real*. Something where you can trust another, allow them to become the stars you gaze up to and admire; grant them the right to pull you from those same murky depths of the cesspool of misery, if they truly love you enough to do so.

That is what made love seem so faithless in your eyes. A cynical, myopic view, yes—but one that has been proven veritable so many times, it's all you have left to cling onto, and to trust in.

However, there is no point in moping and wallowing in self-pity over your present circumstances. All you have left to do is wait, and who knows how long that would take, considering Neuville's hectic schedule? So, you fall back into your previous routine—go to work, go home, get groceries once a week, occasionally meet with Navia—rinse and repeat.

Presently, you are standing with Navia at the foot of her father's grave, paying your respects. Navia is, as expected, silent and mirthless, while you keep your head bowed and hands clasped before you in condolence.

You'd never be able to truly grasp the depth of Navia's sorrow for her dead father, as you never grew up with one present like hers. However, you *can* understand the loneliness—what is it like to have a father, one that cares and loves you, one that supports your family and is a good husband?

You shall never know, as not even your brother remembers his name. Your mother never spoke of him. It was like he never even existed.

“Demoiselle, shall we grab a bite to eat and a coffee at Café Lutece?” Melus' soft, gravelly voice gently breaks the mournful silence, and Navia is taken from her depressive, reminiscent reverie. She looks up, blonde curls bouncing in surprise, before blinking unshed tears away and nodding quickly. “Of course, of course. Come, [Name], I am feeling quite parched. Fonta will do just the trick.”

You pat her shoulder in a sisterly gesture of comfort for her, turning away from the gravesite to head down the path. “Arouet's selling double-chocolate éclairs today. My treat?”

Navia offers you a weak, but grateful, smile in return. “That sounds wonderful.”

Once at the café, Navia's mood had improved substantially. Now, she's happily chatting away, egging you on for details about the meeting you had with Neuville and Lady Furina.

You groan, setting down your caramel latte. “It was an utter *disaster*, Navia. I don't believe I've ever been so affronted in all my life.”

“Really? *That* bad?” She blinks, the choquette she'd picked up from the plate of the snacks paused halfway to her mouth. “What happened? I heard Lady Furina's quite the... *character*, but did she *really* insult you to your face?”

“Well, *initially*, we'd gathered to discuss the wedding date and all those preparations and what-not, but it escalated into an argument between Neuville and Furina instead.” You bite the inside of your cheek in incertitude, unsure of whether it's okay to speak of such personal matters and the somewhat rocky relationship between the Iudex and the Hydro Archon, but you shrug it off. Navia's happy to hear you vent, and unloading about this entire fiasco is just what you need to destress. Besides, you know Navia is trustworthy, and would never dream of using such information wrongfully. “Neuville was right to be so insulted. What Furina is pressuring us into is, frankly, just pure insanity.”

“Okay...” Navia nods slowly, eyes narrowed at you in contemplation. “So, what I thought was you finally finding love after all this time and, well, *you know*.” She quickly breezes over the brief mention of your previous fiancé, fully knowing how touchy of a subject it is for you. “Was just you getting pulled into a problem of Neuville's, where he was commanded by Lady Furina to find a marriageable prospect and wed her? And that just turned out to be you, because you were at the right place at the right time?”

More like the wrong place at the wrong time, you internally lament. “Correct,” you affirm, lifting your coffee cup and swirling the liquid inside it around absentmindedly. “It kind of all sparked when you and Duke Wriothesley pushed me into dancing with him.” You don't blame Navia, although it is rather partly her fault. “Then, you got drunk, passed out in the

garden, it started raining and I noticed Neuville out in it getting drenched.” You try to keep the story brief as possible. “Offered him an umbrella, and we talked. He brought up the circumstances he was— *is* —in, and subsequently got me involved, saying how I’m ‘the most ideal candidate’. He gave me a choice, but you know how I can’t say no sometimes.”

“I don’t blame you, considering how it’s the *Iudex* in question and making such a request of you here.” Navia shakes her head, softly blowing on the hot liquid inside her cup. “But what did *you* say to Lady Furina?” She takes a sip, eyes attentive and awaiting your answer with poorly hidden interest.

“I told them to stop squabbling. That it wouldn’t solve anything, but they calmed down for about three minutes before trying to tear out each other’s throats again.”

“...Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*. Furina said she’s tired of his supposed ‘moping’; he was—justifiably—angered, and tried to give her a lecture about not considering others feelings and such—and by about then I’d had quite enough. So I told Furina I want it in a registry office, since that’s exactly what she *doesn’t* want, and told Neuville to send me a letter of when we’ll get married. Frankly, I don’t want to see their faces for the next century, but I’m left with no choice.”

“That sounds...wow.” Navia seems rendered speechless. “I’m not too sure what to think now.” She falls silent for a moment, and you allow the quietude to descend, taking a bite of your *éclair*.

“What amazes *me* is how she pushed him so far he lost his cool.” Navia brushes her fingers over her mouth as if to cover it, trying to stifle her giggles. “Angriest I’ve ever seen him is when trying to get the spectators in court to shut up, and that can hardly be called anger.”

“Well, he wasn’t yelling or anything, he was just...it’s hard to explain. You’re right—he comes off as a pretty calm, quiet guy, one who definitely wouldn’t throw stuff around in a fit of rage; but he *was* quite frightening, glaring at Lady Furina like that. I felt afraid for her sake, despite knowing he’d never lay a hand on her.” You put your chin in your hand, elbow on the tabletop, staring up into the sky, noting that overcast look of impending rain. “I’m irritated at him, though. Awfully so, in fact.”

As if on cue, a droplet of rain plummets from the sky and splatters against the curb beside you. You blink in surprise. “Huh. Why’s it raining *now*?”

“Mademoiselle [Name], Mademoiselle Navia, forgive me for interrupting you.”

You immediately stiffen at the familiar silky, deep voice, whirling around to face the one person you *really* don’t want to see right now—the *Iudex*. There he stands, posture perfectly straight, robes flowing elegantly in the breeze, hands behind his back, expression unreadable. In fact, you’d say he’s stiffer than usual—his eyes never remain on you for more than two seconds.

“It’s quite alright, Your Honour.” Navia waves his interruption away, seemingly not annoyed. *You* are, though, but you’re hiding it well—although, considering the way he’s lowering his

eyes whenever glancing at you, you're getting an itching feeling you're not masking it *as* well.

"What brings you here to our table on this fine day?" She continues. You're glad she's doing the talking.

"I was merely taking a stroll, and spotted two familiar faces here." Then he *ahems*, pointedly avoiding your stare by looking to the side, gloved hand lightly fisted upon his mouth as he coughs into it. It seems to be a habit of his, always communicating just how awkward he's feeling. You surprise yourself by finding it cute for such a serious man as him. "However, it seems as if I've come at a bad time."

Did he hear our conversation? You stare sidelong at Neuville warily, fisting your hands upon the tabletop. *How embarrassing. He doesn't have any bad intentions, and is at as enormous odds as I, but I'm still disparaging him behind his back.*

You feel awful, finally relenting your gaze from him and turning to look at your half-empty coffee cup, humiliated.

"Not at all. We were just having a little chat about the latest gossip," Navia smiles innocently. You commend her acting skills—but you know it hasn't worked on the Chief Justice at all.

"Aha. I see." He glances at you again, noticing your hard stare at the cutlery before you. He is filled with enormous regret at shocking and thus insulting you at the meeting; unable to purge that image of your harrowing stare and tense jaw from his mind. Thanks to his guilt, the weather has been particularly poor since that day.

Once he saw you sitting with the familiar golden-haired Demoiselle of the Spina du Rosula, his mood lifted, pleased at finally seizing the chance to apologise. The clouds were about to break away from the sky when he heard your words—

I'm irritated at him, though. Awfully so, in fact.

He almost stopped in his tracks and turned away, spirits dampened, the sky beginning to pule. He did not hear a specific name—but he did not need to, for, to him, it was already quite clear.

Neuville does not enquire upon what this 'gossip' is—as he knows, and is never interested in such affairs anyway. "Mademoiselle [Name], I...assume Mademoiselle Navia already knows of our arrangement?"

You feel relieved at his timely, perceptive understanding, straightening and nodding in reply, still avoiding his eyes. "Yes. She does."

"Ah, good. Then, there is no need for me to feel awkward. I've been meaning to apologise for Tuesday."

You dart your gaze up to his then, eyebrows sky-high in surprise. "Truly? Well, thank you, I accept your apology—and I feel as if I should apologise, too, for what you just likely heard

—”

He lifts a hand up in a gentle *stop* gesture, lowering and shaking his head humbly. “No, really, there is no need, as you have every right to be vexed at me.” Neuvillette then smiles softly, eyes unguarded, conveying his innermost sentiments of regret and penitence. You blink at the shock his compassionate gaze gives your heart. “I just wished to settle this small miscommunication before it could possibly escalate further and cause unnecessary strain between us.”

Neuvillette begins to turn away, bowing his head in a gentlemanly gesture of farewell. “Well, then, as I have accomplished what I initially came to do, I bid you two ladies a lovely rest of your day.”

Navia offers her polite goodbyes also, while you are snapped from your dazed state and scramble to do the same. “Of—of course, Monsieur—good day.”

With a parting, small smile, the Chief Justice strides away, off in the direction of the Palais Mermonia, leaving you staring dumbly at his broad back.

Navia turns to gaze at you with wide, shining eyes. “[Name], I think you’re marrying the right man.”

“*What?*”

She leans forward eagerly, beaming. “I never took the Iudex to be such a softie. You are a very lucky woman.”

Navia’s words left you overthinking for the next few days—but it only got worse from there.

What utterly shocked you speechless the week after was the letter you received not from Neuvillette—but one *personally* penned by Lady Furina.

Dear Mademoiselle [Name],

I personally invite you to sit and view the next classical opera coming up with me. Consider this an attempt at making amends, say, and easing the tension between us.

Also, Neuvillette is unhappy with me. I believe that if he sees us together, it’ll cool his ire a little bit (he’s scary when angry, so help me out here, please).

Sincerely,

Lady Furina, Hydro Archon Foçalors.

You angrily clench the paper, insulted at the girl's audacity. *She has the nerve to invite me along for a little show, all because she can't deal with Neuville herself? Has she forgotten that I, too, am in fact incensed at her behaviour?*

A ticket falls from the envelope as you shove the letter back inside it roughly, fluttering to the ground. Upon it is a VIP status-entry grant, with the opera's title— *Les pêcheurs de perles* scrawled across the front in flowing calligraphy. A popular opera, but according to the billet's info on the back, this is the first performance of this particular play in ten years.

One you've always been meaning to attend, as the story is enrapturing, and you're eager to see its representation of Sumerian culture.

But with Furina, of all people? She must have an ulterior motive. Try and talk me into holding a ceremony or something.

You sigh wearily. *Well, it's not like I have a choice. Refusing the Hydro Archon's request — well, more like order— to join her is out of the question .*

You look for the opera's show date on the ticket—next Thursday, at 7PM.

Rubbing your eyes tiredly, you heave a sigh through your nose once more. *Neuville made this sound all so simple in the garden that night.*

With one final, irked glare, you shove the letter and ticket into your bedside table's drawer, getting up for a shower.

if you'd like to read this on tumblr, please click [here](#). I post first on tumblr. thank you for reading!

Chapter End Notes

HEYYYY SO MY EXAMS ARE OVER!! but I start work again next week so celebrations were short-lived 😊 but, here's an update before I disappear for weeks again 🥰

the princess ariadne thing is an actual greek myth, and thought it was suitable for this fic's dynamic, idk. and the 'Do not disturb yourself by imagining your entire life at once' philosophy is one of aurelius'. thought it was also fitting, haha.

sorry for giving you a pretty emo back story w your ex and everything. but hey, we've gotta have the angst and development, right?

it physically pained me to write that beginning letter from your 'uncle' with the wrong your/you're and such. aRGH.

for the 'Les pêcheurs de perles' bit, it's an actual french opera based in Sri Lanka, with Sri Lankan characters—so, I decided to switch it to being set in sumeru to fit the genshin world, yk, just to avoid confusion.

OH AND BTW this is set just before 4.2. might add it in, might not—it depends, really. lmk if you guys would like it.

again, thank you all SOSOSOSOSO much for the support and all the sweet messages. it's what helps me keep writing this, knowing you guys are loving it. you guys made me tear up sometimes. thank you 💕 it was so nice to wake up to such messages and have my day made right from the get go. love you all.

— le soleil qui perce

Chapter Summary

two individuals under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Lady Furina can now see that she will not be able to exert forceful authority upon you. Not while you are under my protection.”

You are currently taking a stroll with Neuvillette late in the evening around Fountain Lucine, as to avoid the citizens milling about the area during the day and thus setting aflame a wildfire of rumours. You yourself requested this meeting, and it took four days for the Iudex to find time within his schedule. Now, you are at his side, talking quietly, undisturbed; unworried about being disturbed. And now, you have only two days until you sit with the Hydro Archon in that opera house looming before you two and listen to her nagging you to have an extravagant wedding.

“That’s very reassuring to hear, Monsieur Neuvillette—but she is your superior. What Lady Furina says goes. And she’s not asking us—she’s *ordering* us. As she has the supreme authority here, we’ve no choice but to obey.”

“You flustered her a great deal at the meeting last week. Your words made her think. She may seem almost tyrannical, but she’d never throw you into prison over such a matter as this. Furina would lose to the Oratrice’s verdict in court—because it has more sense than her. She is not that stupid.”

“Of course she isn’t. And I appreciate that fact—but you are under a surmountable amount of pressure, and therefore as am I. As much as I intend to defy her word, what right do I—we—have? And how long will we be able to have the upper hand?”

Neuvillette pauses in his tracks, and turns to face you fully. You stop also, surprised at his abrupt notion and worried about whether you’ve said something wrong. The Iudex’s expression is earnest. “Lady Furina will relent. She will have no choice to—I shall make sure of that. She may be the Archon, but she has no right to disrespect your wishes.”

Your: You notice how he didn’t say ‘my’ or ‘our’. Appreciation for his consideration of your feelings floods you—and before you can help yourself, you speak your mind. “Neuvillette, you are the kindest man I’ve ever met.”

It's dark, and the sun is setting fast, but you catch the Chief Justice's surprised blink. "Oh—I, that's...thank you."

He quickly looks away, as if to hide his face from you, and continues walking, softly clearing his throat. You're dying of embarrassment—*what on earth just came over me to say something so inappropriate? Now I've made the air unbearably awkward!*

But, it's not like you're *wrong*—Neuvillette's personality and countenance is a far, far cry from the man you thought your ex-fiancé was. Neuvillette is gentle, attentive—he seems to put your concerns first. Your ex-fiancé *pretended* to—he'd listen to you vent, promise to help you out with whatever situation was stressing you out, and then take off for 'business' not a day later, leaving the problem to you. Back then, you genuinely believed him and that he truly *was* busy. And that he truly *couldn't* help you out. Now, you look back and berate yourself harshly for ever having been such a fool—one so blinded by love, they neglected their own well-being.

But Neuvillette sticks to his word, and is currently doing everything within his power to make sure things don't go Furina's way, and that you are saved the bother of a wedding. What is the need for one, when there is a registry office?

"That is why you must remain unyielding when she hassles you at the opera the day after tomorrow," Neuvillette finally says after a long, agonisingly awkward moment of silence. "Because she *will* insist."

"She also said in the letter that you seeing her and I at the opera will 'cool your ire a little bit'." You shake your head and softly scoff. "Will you be at the opera?"

The Iudex nods. "I will be, yes." You both are now strolling down a path towards the shore. "If things escalate, or you need my assistance, I'll be there. I shall be seated in the same VIP dock as you and Lady Furina."

"That's a relief to hear." It truly is.

Silence befalls the both of you, and you continue sauntering down the path, the fresh sea breeze brushing by nicely. It's getting onto later evening now, and you are glad Neuvillette chose *this* particular time of day for this conversation. However, there's another factor of the situation that has been bothering you.

"Since we won't have a ceremony, how will we announce that you are now wed to the public?"

"We don't have to do it *right* away." Neuvillette has no initial intention to do so, anyway. The longer he can put it off, the better—and he has a hunch you'd prefer it that way, also. "Let the ball and dance be the bone we throw the media and populace for now."

You say nothing more, relieved. "I think it's best if we keep our interactions at the opera on a down-low, if that's your plan."

"Agreed." He then glances at you. "Would you like to continue our walk to the shore?"

“Of course.” You adore walking upon the beach at night, despite it not being very safe—but you know that with Neuville, you will be fine.

Hold on. You blink at your own thoughts. *Since when did I start trusting him?*

You risk a look at the Iudex’s side profile—one you could look at all day, in all honesty. You’re amazed that girls are not crazy over him—maybe it’s because he seems so intimidating and too sophisticated to dare to regard in such a way. You know for a fact that he’d feel utterly disgusted and insulted at the concept of him having a ‘fan club’—ones you’ve seen be created for all the popular and handsome opera actors that women stampede the ticket booths to see.

Well. As his future wife, it would be quite awkward for me to have to deal with such, uh... protective fans if Neuville did have fan clubs, you inwardly chuckle at the thought. You’ve seen how crazy some of the girls can get—you once witnessed a cat fight break out after an opera where a particularly famous and good-looking male actor had just performed. And he was from Liyue—a rare occasion due to the sheer extent of his fame, and how uncommonly he visited Fontaine for a show. All the tickets to his opera were sold out within the first hour. Why the girls were fighting? You don’t know, but it was amusing to watch nonetheless.

“Such strolls as this is something I frequently do during what little free time I have,” Neuville comments, and you glance at him in surprise. He continues looking ahead, to the ocean. You see his posture relax a great deal, and a tranquil gleam enters his eyes; that austere look softening into one of true calmness. He turns to look at you. “If you would like, you are more than welcome to join me.”

“Oh, I...” You blink a few times, taken aback. “I mean—I’m not opposed to the idea. But you don’t need to feel obligated to ask me, Neuville, I have no intention of robbing you of what peace you usually don’t have—”

“No, no, you misunderstand me.” Neuville pauses in his tracks, and he offers you a small, albeit genuine smile, one that instantly puts you at ease. *He must have a hidden knack for such things.* This man, usually so upright and stern, now a person who feels at home near the sea, where his true nature is revealed—one of sincere kindness deep down, is adorably awkward, and easy to relate to. You’d never have guessed that your personalities would be so surprisingly similar. Is that the reason why you do not feel so insecure around him, because although he may be a judge—and a righteous one, too—Neuville has not seemed to have grown weary of your cumbersome company yet?

But he will. He will, and he’ll force you away like how he did. What else could you possibly expect, especially of a person like you?

You discard those dark thoughts as best you can, refocusing on what the Chief Justice is presently saying in that quiet, gentle voice of his. One you don’t think you’ll ever grow tired of.

Oh, no. Here we go again. Fear from recognising this sensation pricks at your heart, and further sears your nerves. Forcing the rising bile down, you try your best to look at him, but

your gaze suddenly finds the grass beneath your feet far more interesting.

“...I think we should be friends, Mademoiselle [Name],” he is saying, tone soft, hesitance lacing his words, as if he is nervous you will reject him. *Why?* “That way, we can drop the formalities and be not so stiff around one another.”

Yes, I'd like that. But you're also reluctant. Worrying your bottom lip, you fidget with your thumbs a little. “But, the contract said—”

“Forgive me for interrupting you, but clause thirteen of the contract did state that we may pursue a more ‘relaxed relationship’ if we mutually agree.” Neuville's voice is gentle, comforting. “Therefore, there is no reason for us to *not* become friends.”

You almost agree right there, but another question holds you back. “Neuville, why do you want to be friends with me?”

Neuville is silenced. Such a question is not what he was expecting, and although he does have an answer, he suspects it's something that runs a bit deeper with you—something much more personal.

Could her insecurity have something to do with her ex-fiancé? His background check on you was quite surprising. Five years ago, you were engaged, before it was abruptly cut off. There was nothing recorded subsequently—until now. Apparently, you were happy, until you were not. His private conversation with Navia two days prior said as much. She gave him a brief, vague explanation, before regrettably saying that it is not her story to tell, and knows you would not be happy with him knowing. He understood; Neuville intends to establish a connection where you are able to trust him—maybe enough for you to feel reliant upon him. So you know that he will *never* harm you.

He's seen that snow white scar on your neck. One you try so hard to cover up with high-necked dresses and shirts, under the exhibit of modesty.

Searching for the right words, Neuville does not lie to you. “Because I like you.”

You flinch, and Neuville instantly regrets his word choice. “Th-That is—I enjoy your company, and wish to be able to freely converse and—and we don't have to be so awkward around one another...”

You stare at him, glad for the darkness so that he does not see just how bright red your cheeks likely are. They feel like they're on fire. Neuville, meanwhile, feels the exact same—his eyes dart around uncertainly, and he is extremely flustered. “I apologise if I made you feel uncomfortable. You see, I am not yet familiar enough with humans' way of wording and usage of, well, *context* in such conversations...oh, it sounds like I'm making excuses...”

He trails off, looking defeated, and you scramble to assure him you understand. “It-It's alright, Neuville—I'd love to be friends. I know what you mean. Please, don't be embarrassed.”

“Ah, thank goodness.” Instantly, Neuvillette relaxes, giving you a relieved, breathless smile, running a hand through his hair. *Okay, that was way too attractive. What the hell.* You shake your head slightly to push those thoughts away. *What on earth is going on with me?*

“A-Anyway,” you clear your throat, desperate to diffuse the awkward atmosphere. “What a clear evening it is. The Hydro Dragon must be content, haha.” Your laugh sounds like a choke.

Neuvillette is silent for two long beats before he quietly agrees, abruptly turning to continue walking down to the sand, along the shore. “Yes. He must be.”

There is almost no sense of time when with Neuvillette, and with your newfound friendship, camaraderie comes easily, that previous awkward air almost nonexistent.

The evening is spent well, and you go home, cheeks pink, feeling refreshed. Your mood is lifted, and you feel comforted, no longer anxious for the opera with Furina.

The ticket agent holds out a hand, and you place your entrance billet into it. He takes it, reading over its status, before his eyes almost bug from his head in shock. “V-VIP?”

You suck in a sharp breath, annoyed at the volume of his voice; people turn to stare at you, whispering to themselves. *Please let Furina’s seat be out of sight from everyone.* “Yes. Please stamp it and I’ll be on my way.”

You can see the thoughts racing through his head: *she doesn’t look well-off enough or very important for such a seat.* You purse your lips, raising your brows in question, silently prodding him to get on with it. Finally, he hands the ticket back to you, sending you on your way. “Enjoy the show, ma’am.”

Giving him a tight smile, you promptly pluck the ticket from his hand and turn away. “*Merci.*”

After showing it to the Garde at the opera’s door into the theatre, you make your way up to the higher dock where Furina usually sits and where your spot is. A different Garde gives you directions, eyeing you with poorly hidden curiosity and scepticism, and, ignoring it, you soon arrive at your seat.

“Lady Furina.” You curtsy, reining in your irritation (that hasn’t faded much) for her and you politely greet her. “Thank you for inviting me here today.”

“Oh, here you are!” She immediately stands to welcome you, smile joyous—but you detect a flicker of wariness within it. The reason is soon obvious—Neuvillette has arrived, now standing behind you, making his way to his seat. “So lovely to see you’ve finally arrived. Come, come, sit down. The view from up here is simply *marvellous.*”

You allow her to lead you, taking your seat between her and Neuvillette. You softly greet the Iudex with a small smile and polite word, and he responds in kind. Furina is not lying—you can see the stage very clearly from here, and you’ll likely hear every word without difficulty.

You force yourself to make conversation. “I’ve been meaning to see this opera for a long time. What an opportune invitation, Lady Furina.”

You can’t hide the slight inflection of sarcasm in your tone, but Furina doesn’t appear to notice. Or, more plausibly, she pretends *not* to. “Truly, truly. Many people are here to see this opera. I can’t remember the last time I saw it.”

Chatter filters throughout the room, and you are glad to see that you’re invisible to everyone else down below—rumours would be sure to flare and get right out of control if you were to be spotted. The looks sent your way with just having a VIP ticket—one usually *very* expensive and only something wealthy nobles can obtain—is enough to spike curiosity. With the seats still being filled, and some time before the show actually begins, you listen to Furina’s idle chatter to fill in the awkward silence.

“The actors onstage today are famous in Sumeru,” Furina merrily remarks; her current countenance almost scarily out of proportion to her usual, characteristic spoiled attitude. You assume Neuvillette ‘finally getting married’ is just *that* big of a deal to her. “*What* a joy this shall be.”

“[Name], care for some water?” You turn to see Neuvillette holding up a glass of it. “It’s imported all the way from Inazuma and chilled in Snezhnayan ice. It tastes *quite* exceptional.”

Confused as to why he finds *water* tasteful, you accept his offer regardless. “Yes, thank you, Neuvillette. Cold water is precisely what I need.”

Looking pleased, Neuvillette promptly hands you the glass and you accept it, taking a sip. Its taste *is* quite crisp, and the icy coldness of it adds to the texture. “Hm. You say this was imported from Inazuma?”

“Yes.” You notice how attentive and more at ease the Chief Justice now is since the topic of water popped up. “The taste differences between each regions’ water is distinct, and it’s something I enjoy distinguishing as a pastime. I’ve even held water-tasting parties, partly to grow closer to the populace.”

“*Water*-tasting parties?” You blink at him, glass paused at your lips. “I mean, I’ve heard of *wine*-tasting events, but water...?”

“Is it really that strange?” Neuvillette looks at you quizzically, as if he’s *genuinely* confused as to how ‘water’-tasting is quite a bizarre idea. “I find it more strange how humans are unable to discern the differences in flavour profiles from each region.”

“Well, I would say this water has a...would you say, *sharper* taste to it than regular Fontainian tap water?”

Neuvillette’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Ah, so you *can* detect it. What a delightful surprise! Would you care to give me your opinion on other imported water samples from every other region also, sometime?”

“Uh, of course.” You can see he’s getting excited—and instead of feeling overwhelmed or taken aback, you’re finding it quite adorable. *Like a golden retriever puppy wagging its tail joyously, barely holding back its enthusiasm.* There’s an easy smile playing about his lips now, his amethyst eyes shining. And he looks thrilled when you agree. You find yourself smiling at him genuinely in reply. “I’d love to, Neuvillette.”

“My goodness, haven’t you two gotten close!” The amiable atmosphere is shattered the moment Furina speaks up; as if she’s taken a brick and thrown it at a pane of glass. You both turn to her—the Hydro Archon’s hands are clasped before her as she watches the both of you with an elated look in her eye. That’s when you realise how uncharacteristically quiet she’s been since you and the Iudex began chatting. The entire time, she was listening in, observing the both of you, and is now further convinced you’re both a ‘perfect match’—from what you can see upon her face. “How lovely. Aren’t things just progressing *just* so nicely?”

Neuvillette gives a low, warning, ‘Furina’, while your grip on your glass subconsciously tightens. *Damn her good intentions to hell. She’s taking this too far!* “Whatever could you possibly be implying by *that*, Lady Furina?”

She relaxes back in her seat idly, smiling with a touch of smugness. “Need I really answer that, Mademoiselle [Name]?” Then she leans forward toward the both of you, looking you both dead in the eyes. “I know you’ve cultivated some kind of scheme to get around my predicted nagging of you having a ceremony.” You’re amazed your glass hasn’t shattered in your hand yet, with just how tightly you’re gripping it. However, you remain deathly silent, awaiting her to continue. “No matter. I’ve agreed to back off for the moment. You don’t have to have a ceremony—*but*.” Furina holds up three fingers. “There will be *three* select events I want the both of you to attend in the future as a stellar couple, displaying to all of Teyvat that the famed Chief Justice of Fontaine is now happily married!”

She’s...genuinely delighted at this. You watch her clap her hands cheerfully with narrowed eyes. You understand that she wants the Iudex to be happy—but her living as a divine being likely assists in her misunderstanding how a person must *find* love, not have it forced upon them. Pushing the unwilling Neuvillette into a marriage with an equally unwilling woman is not a choice way for either him or her to fall in love. It’s something you just can’t see happening, anyway.

“I am glad to hear you understand that factor, Furina.” Neuvillette’s smile is traceless, replaced with lips thinned into a sharp line. He stares at her from under his brow, through his lashes, eyes flashing. You can practically *see* the storm clouds gathering around him, rumbling with thunder, conveying his inward, restrained anger. *Goodness, Furina’s starting to skate on some thin ice here.* “Therefore, you will not annoy us about ‘love’ again, if [Name] and I attending *only* three events is all you want.”

Her mouth falls open to protest, before she pauses and gives it a thought. You have a feeling she enjoys acting airheaded, and is much cleverer than she truly lets on. Furina remains silent—but before she can give you her answer, the lights dim and the opera house is silenced, signalling the beginning of the show.

As if nothing happened, Furina redirects her attention to the stage, but not without a barely audible *hmph!* in turn. Giving each other dubious glances in unison, you and Neuvillette also turn to listen to the opening act.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Nation of Justice, Fontaine!” Begins the extravagantly dressed man in the centre of the stage, illuminated solely by a single wide, bright spotlight, his hands raised exorbitantly. His smile is large and welcoming, and he has the classic air of a performer that draws the crowd in—however, it’s not quite as good as Lyney. “On this wonderful evening, where skies are clear and the breeze is soft, we present the ultimate depiction of *true* friendship; friendship unable to be torn asunder by even the rivalry sparked between two who love the same woman! Where two brothers—not in blood, but in spirit—forever remain true to one another, even until death. With this phenomenal opera written by a Fontainian hundreds of years ago after his eye-opening sojourn within the lush jungles and blistering deserts of Sumeru, we present to you, dear audience, the epitome of ancient Sumeruian culture, the embodiment of brotherhood—and the paragon of what a bona fide opera *should* be! And, with that, dearest ladies and gentlemen, *je vous souhaite un bon spectacle!*”

Thunderous applause immediately echoes throughout the opera hall as the man swoops down into an ornate bow, and the spotlight fades. After the moment of adulation, everyone quiety down, and you take a sip from your glass, excited for the show.

The room is silent, and the orchestra begins to let the commencing music fade in, the Sumeruian *dholak* lining out the beat, woodwind and string instruments softly following, and the lights fade in again, the stage ornamented with the setting of a beach, rugged huts, desolate and windy, with an ancient Sumeruian temple in the background. Sound effects of the ocean lapping at the sand, the whistle of the breeze, and the flickering lights of a bonfire accentuate the scene, bringing the beginning life to the opera. There, actors—the Pearl Fishermen—begin their first chorus of *Sur la grève en feu*, beseeching the gods to drive away evil spirits, petitioning them to protect them and their friends during their journeys.

One tanned, bearded Sumeruian man enters, stopping to begin his chorus.

“Friends, pray interrupt your dances and your games, the time has come to choose a leader, who shall command, protect and defend us; a leader beloved by all, watchful and brave.”

The Pearl Fishers stop and turn, crying out upon Zurga’s sighting. *“The master whom we want and choose as our king is you, dear, dear Zurga!”*

Zurga appears surprised, singing out in a confused tone, *“Who? I?”*

“Yes, yes—be our leader, we accept your rule. Friend, be our leader, we accept your rule!”

He strolls forward, shoulders square, face impassive. *“Do you swear to obey me?”*

They chorus in affirmation. *“Be our leader!”*

Thus, the ‘coronation’ commences, and you watch on with rapt attention, now immensely thankful to have been invited. Not one person within the audience is talking, all utterly

immersed.

The opera goes on—Zurga and Nadir reunite, they sing in reminiscence of when they once both fell in love with the beautiful priestess Leila, of whom they both renounced their love for to maintain their friendship.

Things get interesting when the lights focus upon a ‘boat’, sailing up to the shore, and a veiled woman with white robes steps off it and onto the sand. The Pearl Fishers sing and greet her, and the actress’ sweet voice rings out in reply, stunning the crowd.

Ah, my glass is empty, you’ve already finished the water Neuville handed you. Looking around, you see there is no nearby table to place the glass down upon.

Opting to just place it carefully on your lap, you lean back and relax, refocusing on the opera. It happens to just be the moment the priestess, Leila, unveils herself, revealing a tanned Sumeru woman of heavenly features. *Goodness. They really went all out with finding the best-looking singers, huh.*

The man playing Nadir cries out in a minor chord of shock—something you find a bit amusing. The two embrace, and Nadir seems to take back his previous vow to his friend about ‘giving her up’ and remaining true Zurga instead; once he recognises long-lost love, all of that is blown out the window.

The sight strikes an old wound in you, clawing at your heartstrings. Something similar happened long ago, when you thought he’d remain true to *you*. You push the memory away, trying to loosen your muscles that subconsciously tensed at the scene, trying to push the bile down.

Water. I need some more water.

It seems Neuville has quite the intuition as, with a soft, polite tap on your wrist, he whispers, “Would you like some more water?”

Ah. Just turning to look at his expressionless features calms you. Giving him a weak smile, you gratefully hand him the glass. “Yes, thank you, Neuville.”

Swiftly, he refills your glass and it’s handed back to you, eyes brimming with concern despite his carefully kept blank face. “Do you need some air?”

You quickly sip the water, considering his suggestion. *That does sound nice.* But, with a shake of your head, you offer him another appreciative smile. “I’m alright. The second act hasn’t even begun yet. Isn’t the acting just exquisite?”

He quietly hums in agreement, and you both turn to continue watching the opera again. Nadir and Leila have moved on from their passionate declaration of ardent love for one another, and the Pearl Fishers are now pleading to her to continue to bless and protect them—but, while everyone else is seemingly out of earshot, the woman playing Leila sings about how she will sing for Nadir alone.

And with that, the first act concludes; the room is illuminated once more, and people begin to rise for the intermission.

Furina claps her hands together, looking elated. “Now, wasn’t that just *riveting*? Goodness, the woman playing Leila is just so beautiful—oh, [Name], are you alright?” Her smile instantly falls into an expression of concern. “You’re all red in the face.”

“Oh, I am?” *How embarrassing.* You press a hand to your cheek to feel it, the skin heated. You laugh awkwardly. “How strange. Isn’t it hot in here?”

“...It is quite humid,” agrees Neuvillette. “Are you sure you don’t want some air?”

I do! I do, but this is so humiliating! Anything seriously close to a reminder of what that man did to you always triggers an involuntary panic attack. You feel lightheaded, nauseous and way too hot. The two concerned pupils on either side of you and their worried gazes are not helping either.

“[Name], you’re awfully pale.” Neuvillette’s tone is a great deal more grave now. He stands and offers you a hand, gently beckoning you to stand. Furina remains seated, clearly unsure of what to do, her expression anxious. “Your lips are blue. Please, you must step outside for a moment. Would you like me to accompany you?”

Dammit, if only Navia was here! She always instantly knows what to do. You feel like you’re suffocating. And he’s right; you don’t *feel* hot now—if being ‘pale’ were a feeling, this is it. Your heart is palpitating in short little pumps, fluttering around in a flighty, terrified manner. *When will I move on from the trauma?*

You know that with one look in the mirror, you’ll appear terminally ill. The flashbacks are coming in hot now; you internally berate yourself for getting so worked up over an *opera*.

Get a grip, [Name]! You chastise yourself, trying to force the memories away. *Breathe! In and out!*

“[Name]. [Name], breathe with me.” Neuvillette kneels before you and takes your hands. You’re staring at your lap, barely having noticed. The memories of a rope around your neck is getting too much—you feel yourself physically suffocating.

Tightening. Tightening. Tightening. The noose’s grip burns so badly; it begins to squeeze the life from you. Someone’s grip is also tightening on your hands, their thumbs rubbing gentle, soothing circles on your knuckles, and you move to wrench them from the assailant’s grip. You can hear someone calling your name, voice soft and calm, hints of desperation in it, but all you see is murder in *his* eyes.

You’ve always been such a nuisance. The words that haunt your dreams ring loud and clear within your mind. *I’m so sick of you. You never got the hint, did you? You fool of a woman.*

You squeeze your eyes shut, shaking your head, murmuring *no, no, no!* over and over, choking up. *Oh, archons, when will I forget?*

The grip on your hands does not yield, and you detect no malice within the hold. You keep ordering yourself, *breathe, breathe, breathe!*, forcing your lungs into action.

You hear that familiar, deep voice again, the tender massaging on your knuckles not having relented a bit. “That’s right—in, out; in, out.” Your brain finally decides to get over itself, letting you inhale and exhale slowly, gradually, allowing for you to calm down. Your eyes open, chest heaving, eyesight unfocused. Large, gloved hands have engulfed your smaller ones, their grasp so gentle, so firm. A pair of benign amethyst eyes look into yours, filled with such *concern*.

It perturbs you. You’re not sure what to think—you feel safe; comfortable with him holding your hands, but you also want to flee. A man’s feelings and temper is as treacherous as the currents of the sea, as swift to change as the wind, and always like an unexpected, unpredicted downpour of fist-sized hail stones.

“There, you’re fine. No one will harm you, it’s alright.” *To think it’d be a man’s voice comforting me so well.* Neuville’s eyes hold no trace of judgement, only understanding. The last time a male looked you so closely in the eye, he was *literally* wringing your neck.

“The intermission is ending, Neuville.” Furina’s words are what finally wrenches you fully from your anxiety attack, only the rocky aftermath leaving your pulse racing. She sounds uncharacteristically calm, and you sense no judgement from her, either. “You’d best take her outside for a breather.”

“Yes,” Neuville concurs, and he moves to stand, letting go of one of your hands. You miss the feeling immediately. Instead, his free hand rests gently upon your shoulder, sliding down to your upper arm. “[Name], would you like me to help you up?”

“Uh, I think I’ve got it.” Your voice sounds like a frog’s after days without water. Embarrassed, you grimace, lifting yourself from the chair, grateful for his solid grip. “I am *terribly* sorry about this. I don’t know what brought it on.”

“There is nothing for you to apologise for,” Neuville softly says, and his hold on your hand still does not relent. “Come with me, I’ll take you to the nearby balcony.”

You consider jumping off of it the moment you arrive there, never have been so humiliated in your life. *Thank goodness we were up high!* No one seems to have noticed anything. Neuville appears to be in no hurry, keeping pace with you, patiently awaiting you to regather yourself. You opt to link arms with him, holding onto his bicep, the muscle feeling toned and firm even through the fabric of his robes. Him being of a much greater height than you helps—the Iudex is like an anchor you can cling to with utter security, and that’s all you intend on doing for the moment, your limbs feeling like jelly.

“Neuville, I’m sorry.” You find yourself apologising again, unable to think of anything else to do. “I really am. I just had a rough time a few years ago—”

He comes to a stop before a door, turning to you, removing his arm from your hold, gripping your upper arms gently and leaning down so he’s eye-level with you. His mauve hues search yours, gaze sympathetic, compassionate. “Listen to me, [Name]—PTSD is no small matter.

Stop telling yourself you were overreacting. It is not something you could help, and not something you're responsible for." Your heart is jumping around again—but for a completely unrelated reason. You stare at him, wide-eyed, lips parted. Neuville continues, voice quiet and calming. His hand comes up to brush a stray strand of hair from your brow, damp with sweat, tucking it gently behind your ear. The action sends your pulse crazy, heat flaring your cheeks. "You don't have to tell me what happened, but I can assure you that you are no burden. So, please don't apologise. It was only my duty as your friend to help you out."

The Iudex gives you a tender smile, squeezing your arm kindly. "We can stay out for as long as you'd like. You are the current top priority."

"Neuville..." You feel like you're going to cry. You also feel like kissing him. *When was the last time someone treated me with such care?* You catch his hand within your own as he removes it from your cheek, giving it a tight squeeze of appreciation. "I'm glad I met you."

He blinks, staring at you with surprise, before eliciting a breathy, amused chuckle, one that sends your pulse soaring. "So am I. Now, shall we?"

You nod, letting go of his hand so he can turn the doorknob, trying to blink the tears away. *This man, damn him!* He's progressively getting easier and easier to fall for, and that's the last thing you want to happen. *It's only for twelve months, and he's already making me want to stay with him forever.*

You are a fool. A poor, brainless fool. The last time you allowed this to happen, you almost ended up murdered. You know Neuville would never do such a thing to you, but you're afraid rejection will hurt much, much more.

He pushes the door open, and pauses in surprise when he sees it's raining heavily. "Ah. My apologies. It's raining. I...didn't know."

You stare at him, puzzled at his sudden expression of regret. "Why are you apologising? It's not like you can help the weather."

Neuville gives you an unreadable look before sighing, redirecting his gaze to the stormy grey, overcast sky. "It won't do for you to stand out in this. You'll catch a cold."

"Oh, well." You shrug, unbothered. "I like the rain, actually. I used to play out in it all the time as a child."

"Ah." Neuville says awkwardly, seemingly at a loss for what to do. "Um, well, here—take my coat if you wish to stand out in it."

Your eyes bug out in bewilderment as he begins to shrug off his blue robe, scrambling to stop him. "No, no! There's no need, Neuville. You don't want to watch the opera with a damp coat upon your shoulders, right?"

"It's alright, I can just place it aside." He's already taken it off, and is now wrapping it around your shoulders. The Iudex is now only clad in a pristinely ironed white button-down, the top button undone, giving you a brief glimpse of prominent collarbones and a toned upper chest.

You quickly avert your gaze, embarrassed. Neuville doesn't appear to notice. "I also quite enjoy standing in the rain...as you likely already know."

You give him a teasing smile, thinking back to the ball, when you held an umbrella over him as he got soaked in the rain. "Yes. I really don't understand how you don't catch nasty colds."

He reciprocates your playful grin, albeit his is much smaller. "Like I said, I'm resilient. Now, would you like me to leave you in peace?"

"No," you reply a tad too quickly. "Ahem, I mean, if you'd like to watch the opera, please go ahead. There's no need to trouble yourself with me any longer."

"No trouble at all," Neuville responds, placing his hands behind his back and stepping out into the rain—which has now lessened down to a light drizzle. "It's not raining as hard anymore. It would be most unbecoming of such a gentleman as I to leave you alone."

You cluck your tongue genially, shaking your head, holding back laughter. "Were you a poet in your last life, Neuville?"

He looks a bit lost for a second, before huffing a chuckle through his nose, understanding your little quip. He arches a brow at you, a playful smirk curling up his shapely lips. "Must've been. Have I charmed you?"

Your brows raise in amused surprise. "Why, aren't *you* cheeky! And, well, it simply doesn't do to be dishonest." You feign a wistful sigh, placing a dreamy hand upon your cheek. "You most certainly *have* charmed me a great deal. Any more, and I'll just have to start sending you love letters."

Neuville lets out a laugh then, shaking his head in amusement. "You really are something, [Name]. What a joy you are."

Your heart stutters at his words, and you fight back a blush. "Oh, stop it. You're just saying that."

"Shall I write you a poem about all your wonderful traits, then—just to prove how sincere I am?" You know he's just teasing, but it's really going to give you a heart attack. Besides, you can't help but grin a bit abashedly. "Only if you can handle my embellished proclamations of adoration in my love letters, *monsieur*."

He leans forward, tilting his head blithely. "Oh? Who said *you'd* be able to handle my ardent poems and ballads about my snarky fiancée, *mademoiselle*?"

You're about to combust, but you retain control over yourself. *Lean back, or I'll kiss you!* You're dangerously close to giving into the temptation. And the heightening sexual tension is sending shivers all over you. Before you can stop yourself, you reach up and brush the hair falling down upon his forehead to the side, much like how he did just moments ago with you, patting his cheek with mock regret. "My dearest Neuville—keep this up, and I'll crash your water-tasting parties while reading out your passionate poems to the whole of Fontaine."

Neuvillette lifts a brow, nodding with a, *yes-I'm-sure-you-will* attitude, those amethyst hues sparkling with amusement. "Bring it on." He grasps your right hand and lifts it to his lips, placing a soft peck to it, staring at you intensely through his lashes over the top of it, not looking away for a moment. "Future wife."

Oh. You blink, and you blush fiercely at his words and the kiss upon your hand. "You... You are *such* a romantic, Neuvillette. Who knew!"

He chuckles lowly, the sound sultry. "Let's just say that Furina has read to me some scenes from her rubbish books, and I've learned a few things."

He's only acting. He's only acting. He's just being playful. Think nothing of it. It's suddenly hard to breathe. *Goddammit, he's almost treating this like it's real! What am I supposed to do now?*

You manage to control yourself and arch a brow of your own. "I hope they weren't anything too...*detailed?*"

Neuvillette lets go of your hand, raising his own to his nose and pinching the bridge of it, shaking his head tiredly and sighing. "I had to stop her before she got that far, and she insisted she was reading it for my..." he swallows, and his cheeks grow pink. "...Future reference."

"Oh." Your mouth drops open. "S-Surely...you jest?"

"Unfortunately, no." Neuvillette gives an apologetic smile. "You needn't worry—as the contract states, nothing will happen and I will never touch you."

Ah, yes, the contract. The damned thing. You're starting to hate it—but, then again, it *is* Neuvillette's fault for acting so sweetly that you're starting to want *more*. That you're starting to want this to be *real*.

You sigh also, crossing your arms, at a loss for what to say, before noticing the sun's rays beginning to spill out in golden beams from behind the fading clouds. "Oh, it's stopped raining completely. I wonder what pulled at the heartstrings of the Hydro Dragon today?"

"Hm. Yes, a good question." You notice how reticent the Iudex's tone now is. He's gazing at you with unveiled intrigue. "Do you believe in that legend?"

"What, the legend of it raining whenever the Hydro Dragon cries?" You blink, surprised by his question. *How out of the blue.* You struggle to answer. "Well...it's a nice bedtime story for the kids. But, personally...it's obvious the Hydro Dragon exists, and I believe he's hiding in plain sight." You shrug, palm to your forehead, shading your eyes from the sun, looking out into the distance—failing to notice the Chief Justice's slight flinch of his shoulders. "But for the crying part? Who knows." You give him a clueless smile. "If it really is true, then I think it is truly selfless of him to feel so stirred over the emotions of his people. It's almost unheard of to find a divine being that resonates so easily with humans."

Neuvillette stares silently at you, deeply into your eyes, with such intensity that you begin to squirm and heat starts to creep up your neck. You worry that you've said something wrong, but the look in his eyes tells you the opposite—but it's still a gaze too powerful to decipher. "I-I mean...it's just my opinion. I could very well be wrong."

"No. I think you are very insightful." His gaze does not relent. "I'm sure he'd appreciate such words."

You blink at him in confusion, bemused at his cryptic words and tone—but before you can question him, he abruptly clears his throat and turns, relieving you of his vehement stare. "Let's...head back in, shall we?"

"Oh, of course." You instantly feel bad for taking up so much of his time. "Sorry for making you miss out on the opera. It really is a compelling story."

Neuvillette gives you a soft smile—something you suddenly notice he does quite commonly around you, particularly when the both of you are alone. "I think I preferred talking with you. You have such an interesting view on life."

You look away, accepting his arm, allowing him to shut the door behind you both before walking towards your seats again. "Yes, yes, whatever you say, Monsieur Neuvillette."

He merely chuckles in answer, patting your hand with his own free one fondly. "I only say what I mean, [Name]."

Suffice to say that you couldn't focus on the opera after your time with Neuvillette at all. And it had left you wondering, *did he feel the same?*

Oh, well. The man is the embodiment of an enigma itself. You can only hope that one day, he'll feel so comfortable around you as to let you unravel him yourself.

if you would like to read this on tumblr, please click [here](#). I post on tumblr first. thank you for reading!

Chapter End Notes

phew, ok, this is gonna be a long author's note (pls read, it's kinda important)

for the panic attack part, it was written from personal experience. such bouts of anxiety are no joke and are genuinely embarrassing. especially when it's from a particularly traumatic occurrence from the past and it's easily triggered (like w the reader's history w her ex-fiancée), so pls don't think she's overreacting, cause she isn't. ptsd attacks are random and horrible and telling the person to 'calm down' or 'stop overreacting' is the WORST thing to do. like, actuals. im sure many of you can understand 💔 I am so sorry if you can relate.

on a lighter note, I tried to follow the actual libretto of Les pêcheurs de perles, but I had to improvise a little. sorry to all who have seen this opera and it didn't make sense/was inaccurate.

ANYWAYS, I finally found the time to write and it was NOT meant to be this long but, well...honestly? the longer it is, the better. this chapter was such a joy to write and oh god I think I fell in love with neuville all over again. he's so fun to write. god, when is it MY turn to marry him??

yeah im really sorry for the SUPER late update, work is not going easy on me and I hit a bit of an author's block 😊 lasted two days before I told myself to sit yo ass down and write otherwise I would've been put in a mental asylum fr this time 🥰 (bit tmi but my bum actually hurts from sitting at my computer for HOURS straight LMFOAOO)

not COMPLETELY happy w this chapter, but it's my personal fav so far tbh. and it's only gonna get better, if my outline says so 🤔

again, THANK YOU for all the sweet messages and kind words ive been getting. it's because of YOU that im still here and writing this. I owe it all to you, truly 💕💕

— la boîte en verre

Chapter Summary

two individuals under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Brother,” you greet, slipping off your shoes as you enter your brother’s home. “I’m here.”

“[Name]!” He rounds the corner and smiles at you, reaching forward to give you a warm, brotherly hug. “It’s been a while. You look tired. Want some tea?”

“That’d be lovely, thanks.” You nod in gratitude, following him down the hall and into his living room. You look around, noticing someone missing. “Where’s Elvira?”

Your brother, Daniel, replies to you from over the top of his clattering in the kitchen. “She’s out for some groceries. Want to stay for lunch?”

You don’t want to impose, but it *has* been a while since you last saw your brother, the only blood family you’ve left, and you’ve got a *lot* to tell him. “Sure. How far along is she now?”

“Twenty-one weeks.” Daniel places a cup of steaming tea on the coaster on your side of the coffee table, filling you in about the pregnancy he and his wife, Elvria, have been so excited for. “I told her *I’d* go out and get the food, but she says she’s sick of sitting around here all day.”

“Fair enough.” You smile, lifting the cup to take a sip, before you grow solemn again. “I’ve actually come to tell you about something.”

“Yeah. I’ve noticed the engagement ring.” Daniel leans back in his chair with his own tea, nodding towards your right hand. “Who’s the lucky guy?” His stare turns cold. “If he’s anything like your ex—”

“No! No, he’s not.” You immediately scramble to assure him that your ex-fiancé is *incomparable* to Neuville. “He’s a good man, but there’s a lot more to it than you think. I’ll tell you both over lunch. Just, uh...try not to freak out too much.”

Daniel frowns in confusion. “What does that mean?”

You shrug, avoiding his eyes. “Let’s just say the guy’s pretty...*important*.” You quickly change the topic. “Have you guys been told the gender of the baby yet?”

“Oh, yes!” Your brother instantly sits up straighter, looking like an excited kid on his birthday. “We were told two weeks ago. You’re going to have a niece!”

“Really?” You smile. “How wonderful. I can make some baby clothes for her, if you’d like.”

Daniel opens his mouth to reply when the sound of keys jingling at the front door and the door opening interrupts him. Shuffling ensues, and Elvira soon rounds the corner. “Daniel, I grabbed some profiteroles—oh! [Name], how lovely it is to see you!”

You stand and hug her in greeting, glancing towards the obvious bump on her belly. “Daniel just told me it’s a girl!”

Elvira dumps down the bags of groceries on the kitchen counter. “Yes. Isn’t it exciting? Anyway, what’s brought you here today?”

“I have news.” You flash an awkward smile. “Big news.” You hold up your right hand, showing the engagement ring on your finger. “I’m engaged...again.”

Elvira’s eyes bulge in shock at the sight, before beaming. “Oh, congrats, [Name]! Who is he?” Then she also adopts that same icy, protective stare your brother just had, smile vanishing with such speed, you blink in surprise. “Please tell me he’s better than that sorry excuse for a man you once were betrothed to.”

“*Way* better,” you can easily say with confidence. “But, well...like I just said to Daniel before you arrived, there’s a lot more to it than just a simple engagement out of love.” *In fact*, ‘love’ *has nothing to do with it*.

She tilts her head confusedly at her, passing a jar of peanut butter to Daniel for him to put in the cupboard. “How do you mean? Is it like an engagement of convenience or something?”

“...You’ve hit the nail right on the head,” you murmur, awkwardly scratching your cheek. “I’ll go into detail over lunch, if you’re happy to have me.”

“Of course! Like we’d kick you out.” Elvira grabs a pot down from the cabinet below the sink and places it on the stove. “How’s Navia been? Considering the entire ordeal after Lynney and Lynette’s trial.”

Until the moment you all sit down, you engage in small talk and lighthearted conversation before picking the opportune moment to drop the enormous bomb of *who* your future husband is. You’re starting to regret choosing to tell them over food, because with Daniel and his tendency to be dramatic when reacting to big news, he would probably choke on his boiled egg.

“Okay, now—who’ve you wooed this time?” Elvira jokes, setting the dish of *salade niçoise* down upon the middle of the dining table. You three take a seat, Daniel and Elvira beside one another, you across from them. Daniel passes the spoon to you first, and you scoop some of

the salad onto your plate. Huffing out an attempt at a laugh, you shake your head. “I haven’t wooed anyone. This engagement isn’t out of...love.” You avoid their perplexed looks. “It’s of convenience, because I met the man at a ball, we danced and—”

“Hold on...” Daniel narrows his eyes at you. “Didn’t we hear something similar in the newspaper? That the Chief Justice danced with some woman at a ball about two or so months back?”

You purse your lips, inhaling a deep, readying breath. “Yes. That woman was me.”

Elvira’s fork clattered to the table from her hold. “*What?! You’re kidding! And—and...*”

“Let me explain. Neuvill—I mean, His Honour is under a lot of pressure from our Archon to marry.” You avert your gaze to the tablecloth, worrying your bottom lip as you search for the right words. “Navia and the Duke of Meropide managed to dupe him into dancing with me, albeit unwillingly, and that’s what sparked the rumours. I’m still unidentified...until we marry and his marriage is announced to the public.”

“Oh my...” Elvira holds a hand over her mouth in shock, while Daniel gapes at you, a piece of lettuce hanging from his lips. You’d find the sight grossly comical if it weren’t for the current conversation topic. “So...how did he propose to you?”

“It’s...a long story, but put simply, we talked in the garden privately later that night and he explained his circumstances to me. I saw no other way out other than agreeing.” You stab at a half of a cherry tomato, appetite nonexistent, absentminded. “Things have escalated thanks to the Hydro Archon. I even had an argument with her over how ridiculous this whole thing is. She keeps on insisting—but I managed to make her agree to us not having a ceremony. Oh, and it’s only for a year. So it isn’t *as* big of a deal as it seems.”

“You’re not getting married...for love?” Daniel’s tone is quiet, his expression dismayed. “I’d hoped you’d moved on and had finally found the right person, sister.”

You give him an emotionless, rueful grin. “Well, I haven’t, and I’m only doing this because I’ve no choice. I’d never pursue another relationship again if it weren’t for my betrothal to the Chief Justice. And when the twelve months are up, he and I shall part ways and have no reason to interact again. I will grow old, he will not, so this entire thing is utterly incompatible anyway. He is a good man, and we get along very well, but this is more like a business agreement than anything else.”

Your brother and his wife stare at you in silence, and you feel judged. Uncomfortable, you force yourself to take a sip of water. “You don’t need to look at me like that. I’m managing just fine.”

“...If you say so.” Daniel sounds utterly unconvinced, before giving a decided shrug. “Either way, I must meet with the Iudex and have a chat with him myself. He’s going to become my brother-in-law soon, anyway.”

You want to argue, but he has a reasonable point. “...Alright, I’ll send him a letter and ask him for some time for you both to meet. Don’t pull anything funny, now.”

Daniel gives you a look. “We’ll just be having an amicable, brotherly *chat* about his future wife—*my sister*.” Sometimes you get tired of how protective your brother has always been—*especially* since the incident with your ex-fiancé. You appreciate how much he cares for you, considering he’s the only family you have left, but you doubt he’ll get anywhere trying to intimidate *the* Chief Justice of Fontaine.

“Well, good luck with that, Daniel.” Elvira seems to think the same as you, as she gives your brother a smack on his upper arm with the back of her hand. “As if you’re gonna exert superiority on the *Iudex*. He’ll probably think you’re an idiot.”

“No, he won’t.” It’s beginning to annoy you how much people put Neuvilleite in a box; acting as if he’s some kind of authoritarian that is void of emotion. Someone who you just cannot approach, someone you’ll never be able to relate to—and while some element of that is true, considering his impartiality and aversion to pursuing relationships with others, he is not the man people have painted him out to be. He is by no means cruel or unfeeling. And he understands more than people think. “He will see where you’re coming from. Neuvilleite would never consider you a fool. He’s just not that kind of person.”

The couple stares at you, silenced, before you realise just how your words have come off. “He and I are friends. The man has been exceptionally kind to me. Please don’t judge him too harshly.”

Daniel relents—however, he does not lose that sceptical look in his eye. “Okay. But I’ll leave my personal conclusions for when I personally speak with the *Iudex*.”

The judge is now getting judged, you think humorlessly, shoving a forkful of the salad in your mouth. *I wonder how he’ll react? I’d better warn him in advance in the letter.*

Elvira, ever the peacemaker, eventually brings up another topic to diffuse the tense atmosphere, and you spend the rest of the afternoon catching up with your brother and sister-in-law. However, nothing proved successful in repudiating the premonition brewing within you at the inevitable meeting between your brother and Neuvilleite—and for what would be to come subsequent to that.

To Mademoiselle [Name],

Thank you for your letter regarding your brother’s intention to meet with me. I understand and respect his reasoning and why he would want to discuss this matter with me personally. That is what family is for, is it not? I have time on Monday at 1:30PM, if that is a suitable day for us to gather.

Please have a pleasant rest of your week.

Chief Justice Neuvilleite.

“Well, there you go, Daniel.” You shove the letter towards your brother, crossing your arms. “There’s his confirmation. He’s happy to meet with you. What, you gonna criticise his handwriting now?”

You can't understand how your brother has decided to adamantly dislike the Chief Justice when he's never even met him. You suppose Daniel never really had much of an opinion of the man in the first place, but now it's *really* down below par. For what reason, you really don't see—as Neuville has never done anything personal to neither you nor your brother.

Daniel huffs once he reads the letter. "It's too *brief*. Maybe he could've complimented you a bit more? Or maybe even *me*?"

You squeeze your eyes shut in aggravation. "For the *last* time, Daniel—this is a marriage of convenience! There are no strings attached—no love, no feelings! And Neuville is nothing like *that* man. Save your harsh judgements of him until you've actually talked with the guy."

"I don't *need* to have talked with him—I can already gather from just the way he acts in the Opera Epiclése that he'll neglect you—"

The sharp sound of a *smack!* resonates around the street, earning stares from passersby. Daniel lets out a yelp of pain and rubs the back of his head, recoiling from you, eyes wide. You have your hand raised threateningly, silently warning him that another one is sure to come if he keeps up this rot. "When we are in his office, you *will* talk to him respectfully, you will *not* try to one-up him or demand anything from him, and you *will not*, under any circumstance, say *anything* about my ex. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," your brother immediately answers subduedly, looking like a little kid who just got a good scolding—which he, essentially, did.

"Glad to hear it," you curtly say. You both are currently outside the Palais Mermonia, and it is Monday, the day you're meeting with the Chief Justice—well, your *brother* is meeting with him. You're just going in with him to keep a hawk's eyes on him, to make sure he doesn't do anything out of line—something you have a feeling he's going to do anyway, regardless of your warnings.

To think I have to escort this manchild in there myself, you both ascend the steps to the entrance of the Palais Mermonia, twenty minutes before your scheduled appointment with the Iudex. *He's married and with a pregnant wife and older than me, yet he always acts like he's still twelve!*

You've simply resolved yourself to believe this is the ultimate dynamic siblings will always have. There'll always be one keeping the other in check—regardless when *your* said sibling acted as your legal guardian until you were eighteen, and then it was like *you* had to babysit *him* from then on.

Whenever Elvira isn't around to whack him over the head with a rolled up newspaper when he acts out, the responsibility falls to you. And it appears there'll be quite a bit of pinching where he's most ticklish to keep him from opening his big mouth and humiliating *both* of you in front of the Iudex in the upcoming meeting.

You have to keep a hand on Daniel's sleeve as you practically drag him in. You both trudge up to the front desk where the same Melusine, Sedene, sits, going about her duties happily.

“Hello again, Sedene,” you smile, pulling your brother to a stop up beside you. “We’ve come for our appointment with the Iudex at one-thirty.”

“Ah! Of course, give me just a moment, I’ll let him know you’ve arrived.” The Melusine promptly hops down from her chair and begins to toddle over to the Chief Justice’s office door. “Take a seat over there for now.”

You thank her and immediately turn to sit down, leaving your brother no room to make any potential moves. “Remember what I said? About speaking to him respectfully?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, [Name].” Daniel rolls his eyes, but quickly fixes his tone *and* expression at the murderous look you send him. “Ahem. Yes. I won’t speak out of turn.”

You don’t answer, not exactly satisfied, still anxious about how he’s going to act around the Iudex. You’d probably have to stick around after your brother leaves to personally apologise to Neuvillette.

“Alright, you two, come along now—the Iudex is ready for you.” You both snap to attention when Sedene’s friendly voice calls from before Neuvillette’s door. “Head on in.”

The two of you quickly head into his office, the door shutting behind you. Neuvillette is at his desk, perusing some papers, before looking up and giving you both a closed-lipped, welcoming smile, standing and stepping around his desk to greet you. “Ah, Mademoiselle [Name], Monsieur.” Neuvillette holds out a hand to your brother to shake. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

You’re relieved to see Daniel give an equally amicable smile back and take Neuvillette’s hand to firmly shake it. “No, sir, it’s *my* honour to make your acquaintance. I was a bit shocked at the news of your betrothal when my sister told me, you see.”

Thank goodness, he’s being mature. You side-eye your brother in the meantime, warily watching him like a hawk. *One wrong move and he’s dead meat, I tell you.*

“Of course, as anyone would likely be.” Neuvillette turns and gestures to the sofas, welcoming you both to take a seat. “Please, sit. Would you like a drink?”

“Oh! Yes, please.” You can tell just by Daniel’s elated expression that he thinks Neuvillette’s going to pour him a glass of brandy—when, in reality, it’s going to be a glass of personally selected and imported water all the way from Natlan or something. You amusedly watch the Chief Justice do just what you predicted—lift a glass jug foggy with condensation, the water inside pleasantly chilled, and elegantly pour it into a drinking glass. You see Daniel blink in confusion, but politely accepts the drink either way, subtly taking a whiff of the liquid inside just to make sure—ultimately frowning even more in puzzlement. Meanwhile, Neuvillette’s expression is content, the corners of his lips lifted into a small, pleased smile, his aura nothing like his usual intimidating, grave countenance. You also take the glass offered to you with a soft thank-you and smile, trying hard not to cackle at Daniel’s baffled reactions.

Neuvillette also takes a seat upon the armchair having been previously pulled up in front of the sofa so he can casually chat without being on the other side of his office, far away. You,

opting to remain silent and leaving it to the two men to initiate the conversation, lean back into your own seat and eye Daniel amusedly, foot purposefully close to his shin if there is a need to kick him.

“Now, I think I already know why you’ve requested to meet with me,” begins Neuville, inclining his head towards Daniel in a respectful gesture. “And I completely understand why. I am happy to explain to you the reality of the situation—or, should I say, *predicament*, your sister and I are currently in.”

“Ahem, yes,” Daniel coughs lightly, awkwardly. *He seems to have taken my warnings to heart.* You mercifully shift your foot a little further away from his leg, not *so* on-guard now. “[Name] has told me the brief version. May I inquire as to where your relationship with my sister truly lies?”

Neuville doesn’t seem bothered at all by any of his questions, much to your relief. “I can assure you that this is a business transaction of sorts. Our relationship is strictly professional—however, Mademoiselle [Name] and I have mutually agreed to become friends.”

“We both believe it to make things easier for us while we are forced into intimate proximity as part of the act Lady Furina is impelling us to put up,” you inform your brother. Neuville nods in agreement, and you continue. “We have a contract. It has all the necessary clauses towards making sure this ‘marriage’ remains chaste and systematic.”

You really don’t know *why* you both have to explain yourselves to Daniel so much, but here you and Neuville are. Daniel looks from you to Neuville with clear scepticism. “... Okay. I’ll be honest, then.” You immediately tense at your brother’s tone. He looks the Iudex straight in the eye. “Initially, monsieur, I came to suss you out. To see what kind of man my sister is marrying. I didn’t expect you two to just be heading into a marriage of convenience; like this is some kind of third-rate romance novel from Yae Publishing House.” You could’ve sworn you saw a flicker of surprise and slight amusement in Neuville’s mauve eyes at your brother’s unintentionally ironic statement. Daniel doesn’t appear to notice, as the look is gone as quickly as it came. “And, well, I’m sure you can understand why I, as her older brother, would be so protective. You see, five years ago, she was—”

You immediately kick Daniel’s leg—aiming for his shin, accidentally hitting his ankle instead, earning a slight yelp from him. Neuville blinks in surprise, sweeping his perplexed amethyst gaze to you. You smile tightly. “We don’t need to go that deep into it. What he’s saying is that he’s wary, which is perfectly fine. *However*,” you grit out the word, turning to Daniel. “He ought to have had quite enough explained to him by now. So, therefore, I believe this meeting is ov—”

“Wait just a minute, [Name],” Neuville interrupts. “I believe I’m owed an explanation. What happened five years ago that has made you all so cautious? I’d like to know.”

“Neuville, please don’t pry—”

“Five years ago, my sister was in a relationship and got engaged,” Daniel says over the top of you, having recovered from rubbing his sore ankle. You whip around sharply, drilling him with a warning glare to *shut up*. Your brother ignores you, and panic rises. “Her ex-fiancé

was a very bad man. *That...*” He reciprocates your look with a stern one of his own. “Is all I’ll say. You’ll tell him in due course, right, [Name]?”

No, I won’t, but you’re not exactly sure about that yourself. Clenching your jaw, you send a guarded look the Iudex’s way, and he silently stares back with a clear-eyed, unreadable gaze. That makes you quickly avert yours back to your brother. “Depends. This is for twelve months only. I don’t see why—with all due respect, of course, Your Honour—” your tone turns a tad sardonic, and Neuvillette notices, giving you a sidelong look. “—He needs to know. It’s not that big of a deal, anyway.”

Neuvillette lifts one silver brow slowly, as if to say, *really?* while Daniel gazes at you incredulously. They’re both dead silent, staring at you, and you press your lips together awkwardly. “Five years is a...long time. It won’t affect this *contractual* relationship at all, so I don’t see why it matters.”

You know that Neuvillette has already connected the dots—from your initial reluctance to agree to this entire ordeal, the panic attack at the opera, to the background check he’d have done on you, where all the undetailed but necessary information would’ve already been recorded—he clearly does not believe your words. Save for Daniel’s dubious, open-mouthed stare that really isn’t helping your case, you can’t say you agree with your own words yourself—because, ever since the time alone with Neuvillette after your anxiety attack, he hasn’t really left your thoughts. The way he dealt with the situation so calmly and then stayed with you afterwards really got you thinking—*this man seems trustworthy. Is it worth the risk...*?

“So, do we have your blessing, *brother?*” The awkward silence has gotten too much to bear. Your words make Daniel snap his mouth shut and blink, before shaking his head in indecision. “I don’t know...I don’t want you hurt.”

“I’m not *going* to get hurt, Daniel.” *Is it really that hard to understand?* “This marriage is not *real*. So there is no problem posed. We’re going to have to go through with it anyway, as the contract’s already signed.”

You’ve noticed Neuvillette’s silence so far, and you try not to let it bother you too much. He’s just observing the both of you quietly, expression unreadable—which makes it all the worse. You’re just hoping he gets the hint and doesn’t prolong this tedious conversation any longer.

“Well, you’re an adult, [Name].” You almost sigh in relief at how your brother *finally* decides to relent; shaking his head and sighing wearily. “I just fear you haven’t learned your lesson.” You freeze up at his words, blood now ice-cold in your veins—but neither seem to have noticed, as Daniel has turned to the Chief Justice. “This may be a ‘contractual’ relationship, but please take good care of her. She needs it.”

You hardly hear him—and you don’t catch Neuvillette’s reply. You’re too busy thinking about your brother’s words.

I haven’t learned my lesson? Yes, the wound is still only scabbed over, the inside still bloody and vulnerable. Yes, you’re a fool for thinking that keeping all men at arm’s length and never pursuing another relationship would help you move on. And yes, you know how weak you

and your heart is—especially to the actions of a man that appears genuine, as if truly derived from the depths of his heart with sincere feelings and motives; one who looks at you with such soft, *feeling* amethyst eyes, and would be sure to engulf your small hands within his large, warm ones and hold on tight, never to let go. The words hit real close to home, *too* close—and now, you’re at a loss for what to do.

It’s like everything you fabricated *yourself*—that image that you had illustrated with your own hand, that mirage you’d dreamed up while wallowing within the depths of your darkest memories as mere, weak fragments of comfort—finally had that cruel brick of reality thrown at its feeble glass. And when glass shatters, it goes everywhere—splintered into millions of tiny bits and pieces, impossible to ever find and pick up and put back together again and into its original state. The mess subsequent is nonetheless bothersome—you must be careful to not cut yourself with the larger shards, the edges sharp and cruel; and beware the smaller pieces, as they are so easy to get into your skin, into your bloodstream, posing great medical setbacks.

Your heart is guarded by a glass box. One wall of it has now been broken, and the shards have embedded themselves deeply into your heart’s flesh, dealing irreparable damage.

Your heart is struggling to beat. A major, detrimental part of its shield has been demolished, leaving it to leap in fear—to race in dread. It’s a conscious muscle; if the glass box—the one that protects your soul from further harm, when the seams holding your unmended heart together through the middle are so loose—collapsed entirely, leaving only one blow left to vitiate your heart once and for all, what will you do then?

They say the heart knows what it wants. Would they also say the heart knows when it’s about to disintegrate?

You’re snapped from your abysmal thoughts when someone pats your shoulder. You look up at Daniel, who gestures towards the door. “Time to head off, [Name]. Thank you for having us, Monsieur Neuville.”

“Of course.” You don’t miss the concerned look he sends your way, before it is masked with politeness again. “Have a wonderful rest of your day, you two.”

With a quick goodbye and smile, you and your brother exit the Palais Mermonia; Daniel letting out a large sigh of relief. “Well, glad that’s over. I think you’re marrying a good guy—hey, [Name], you okay?”

“I’m heading home now, Daniel,” you say quietly, avoiding his eyes. “I’m...tired.”

“Oh, okay.” He blinks, clearly not fully believing you, before conceding. “Well, I’ll tell Elvira you said hi. Make sure to eat dinner, alright?”

“Yeah.” You’re already walking away, leaving with a feeble wave. “See ya, Dan.”

You leave your brother standing there, confused at your swift change of mood, while you cradle what’s left of your heart’s shield.

What will happen if my soul is shattered?

It's simple: you won't recover.

anyway, if you'd like to read this on tumblr, please click [here](#). I post first on tumblr. thank you for reading!

Chapter End Notes

hey guys!! sorry if this seems rushed, it's because im going away for the weekend and won't be able to write, so I had to get this out the door asap. it's almost 11pm for me so if I don't hurry up and get this uploaded my parents will barge in here and take my laptop off me 😊

say hello to your brother!! he'll be showing up a lot, so better get used to him LOL

yeah, this wasn't even meant to be that angsty. oh well. sometimes things just don't go to plan (wink wonk)

so! hope you enjoyed, however short this may be. again, tyasm for the sweet messages on here and on ao3. it's appreciated!!

— nuits fontainiennes

Chapter Summary

two individuals under pressure to marry. one has the hydro archon on his back, and the other has her matchmaking friend pushing her along. when the two meet at a ball, and both in dire need of peace from two meddlesome females, what better arrangement is there than their own betrothal?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You now stare at the plain gold wedding band sitting on your left hand, the engagement ring glimmering above it. Upon the papers in front of you, your signature and the Chief Justice's are scrawled neatly across the line, one above the other—showing the officiation of your marriage.

Neuvillette stands by your side, adjusting the glove on his left hand, the gleam of the wedding ring disappearing underneath the material.

The wedding witness stands nearby, staring at you both with a way-too-elated expression, clasping her hands together in front of her face, beaming. “You’re married now! Oh, how lovely! Finally, Neuvillette—you’re no longer a loner!”

Neuvillette side-eyes Furina, flexing his long fingers to make sure the glove is fitted comfortably, before promptly ignoring her remark, turning to you. You’re a bit dazed, lost in thought, the reality of the situation now *really* settling down on you.

Okay. I am now officially Madame Neuvillette. I am tied to this man and thus this sporadic archon for the next twelve months...with three ‘events’ she wants us to attend; guaranteed unwanted attention from the press when our marriage is announced, and I’ve actually managed to get married after...that... you glance at Neuvillette, taking in his tall, broad-shouldered frame and those eyes of his—ones at are currently looking at you in earnest, as if waiting for you to say something.

That’s when you realise he has just asked you something, awaiting your answer. Blinking, trying to push your jumbled thoughts away, you flash an awkward smile. “Sorry, could you repeat that, please?”

“Of course. There are still some things to discuss, shall we see ourselves out?” The Iudex gestures to the exit, sending the clear message to Furina in the process that she is *not* welcome to join you both, considering his pointed avoidance of her presence; you find yourself inclined to the same, giving him a nod.

“Yes, we should. Have a pleasant rest of your day, Lady Furina.” You decide to make his insinuating body language more obvious, and although Furina looks disappointed, you both leave no room for her arguments and swiftly leave.

The walk through the registry office’s halls is silent, awkward. Despite you both being friends and on casual terms, you are both, at the end of the day, introverts—maybe Neuvillette a bit *more* of an introvert than you—and that silence is all-too-common and all-too-suffocating; wracking your brains for how to begin the conversation.

“Uh, so...” you clear your throat, adjusting the strap of your handbag on your shoulder. “What is it you wished to discuss?”

“Oh, yes.” Neuvillette seems broken from his thoughts, blinking. “When do you believe is an ideal time for you to move into my wing of the Palais Mermonia?”

“By the end of this week,” you answer. You don’t have much to pack—as all the furniture and such within your apartment belongs to your landlord, and it’s not like you’ll need it anyway. However, you’re worried about what you’re going to do once the twelve months are up. *Finding apartments is so difficult, and it’s unlikely I’ll be able to have my current one back.*

We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it, you decide there’s no point in worrying over something so far away. For the next twelve months, you’ll be living in comfort—however, it remains a double-edged sword. In exchange for that ‘comfort’, you must give up your privacy and bear with the Hydro Archon’s constant badgering.

I suppose it’s not much of a change of routine for Neuvillette, you think, glancing at him. He’s nodding at your previous statement, waiting for you to continue. “I don’t have very many belongings, so I won’t need a big room.”

“It’s alright, I know the perfect room for you. Nothing too extravagant, right?” Neuvillette gives you a soft, knowing smile, and you find yourself grinning back. “That’s right. Just as long as there’s a bookshelf in there. I’ve got quite a few books to shelve.”

“Do you enjoy reading?” He seems almost surprised. With his reaction comes the realisation that neither of you really know much about each other at all—and, with disappointment deep down, you see there is no real reason to ask anyway.

The circumstances are different for now, however, due to you both making small talk as you walk towards the exit. “I do. You needn’t worry—my taste in literature is not that of those from Yae Publishing House.”

Neuvillette chuckles. “Oh, that hadn’t even crossed my mind—and even if you do enjoy such...books, I would not judge you.”

“I thought the Chief Justice is supposed to be one who is not ‘predisposed’ to lying.” You shoot him a cheeky grin, arching a brow. He averts his gaze, clearly also trying to hold back a smile, looking like a sneaky kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Please, Neuvillette, I know all too well of your opinion over those novels from Inazuma, and I actually quite agree

with you. No, I prefer fiction on adventure and history. Romance is alright, but it is not my first option.”

That, in fact, is a lie—there are many romance books that you’ve collected over the years, and that you enjoyed very much. However, they were *not* acquired from Yae Publishing House—they are old books, ones you’d never see in the bookstores anymore, written decades ago, even in the early years of previous centuries. They once belonged to your great aunt, who died when you were only four—and despite you hardly remembering her, she bequeathed her beloved books to you.

Perhaps her gift to you even when you were so little is what motivated you to attend the Akademiya—your mother told you that she studied in the Haravatat Darshan, was top of her class, and returned to Fontaine long after her graduation. None of the books she gave you were in varying languages, though—they were all in Fontainian, and one happened to be a book she herself wrote, under a pseudonym, when she was young and in love.

Why she didn’t become an established author is something you genuinely cannot fathom. The story, although with characters of different names and settings, was essentially a retelling of her years at the Akademiya, of the man she met and married—and acted as a diary of sorts.

It was nice to be able to tap into the lives of family members you never knew. To see that they loved you, even when you were too young to know how to love them back or even remember their faces. So, though not entirely a lie, and despite your adamant aversion of ‘love’, due to that horrid past experience, you do enjoy the romance genre—seeing fictional characters succeed in life where you have fallen short is almost somewhat of an oxymoron for you; it’s ironic how you take comfort in the happiness of make-believe people, when your own circumstances are so very bleak.

“Maybe you could recommend Lady Furina some,” Neuvillette comments, his tone slightly sardonic. “She could most certainly learn from you.”

“The books I like would bore her to tears.” *Especially if she enjoys bawdy ones.* “She isn’t going to suggest...*things* to me for ‘future reference’ either, will she?”

“If she does, notify me immediately.” Neuvillette sends a sharp look your way, and he feels his ears begin to burn. “I *will* outlaw the store if I have to.” He then softly *ahems*, embarrassed. “Please forget I ever mentioned that.”

“But *why*, dearest husband?” You tease, enjoying his innocent reaction. “It was awfully entertaining. What if she pressures us to have a baby?”

Neuvillette stops in his tracks, and you feel a bit bad from the expression on his face—he looks like he’s about to cry from embarrassment. “Goodness, [Name], *please* don’t. I never should’ve said anything.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, Neuvillette.” You immediately drop your goading, internally chastising yourself for humiliating him. “I was just teasing, I apologise if I insulted you.”

“No, no—” he tiredly shakes his head, attempting to smile. “It’s alright. But, I meant what I said—if she does lend you any of her ‘books’ or suggests we have a child, please come speak with me as soon as possible.”

I’d probably be quite okay with handling her myself, but I have to reassure him; you feel quite taken aback by the intensity of his urgent gaze, and you find yourself nodding. “Yes, of course, Neuville, I will. You needn’t worry, though—she won’t ever sway me.”

He seems relieved at your answer, and thus holds out his arm for you to take. “We are married now, and we must rely upon one another through this.”

You agree. “Right. We’re a team.” You pat his forearm, quietly observing that he’s hiding quite a bit of muscle under those stately robes of his. *Well, all things considered, he is quite a well-built man.*

It makes you curious to how he finds the time to remain in shape. “Neuville, do you have a fitness routine?”

You both arrive at the doors of the registry office and step through them, heading for more deserted, quieter streets where no prying eyes will see you both and send rumours flying too early. It is getting onto late afternoon, early evening now; the breeze gentle and cool, the sky mostly clear, a few clouds streaked here and there. It’s pleasant, perfect for an amicable chat over the inevitable events for the next twelve months.

Neuville clearly didn’t expect your question, for he struggles to answer. “Uh, well, not *exactly*—you see, I don’t really have the time to have a ‘fitness routine’. I enjoy long walks, and swimming.”

“You like to swim?” Your brows shoot up, tilting your head up to look at him in surprise. “I don’t see a Vision on you, though.” You giggle to yourself at the mental image of the Chief Justice in a big, clunky diving suit. “I can’t see you going around with those fish bowls for diving helmets on your head, Neuville.”

Neuville stares down at you, an amused grin curling up his full lips. “No, I have other means of diving. It’s a very refreshing experience, maybe you could join me sometime.”

“If only,” you huff out a laugh through your nose. “I don’t have a Vision, and I don’t like getting wet, so I think I’ll have to pass.”

“A shame, for the views are spectacular,” he sighs as if genuinely disappointed. “We shall just have to settle for strolls along the shore, yes?”

“That sounds delightful,” you hum in agreement. “What a choice way of escaping from the pestering of Lady Furina.”

He chuckles. “Truly. Shall I escort you home? It’s getting late.”

“You don’t need to, Neuville.” It seems to be only about seven in the evening, and your apartment isn’t too far away. “Aren’t you tired? Don’t you need to rest?”

It's too dark to see, as you both are strolling through a darkened part of the street, unilluminated by the streetlights—but you could've sworn his expression fell. *It must be my imagination*, as it's gone the moment you pass under a lamppost. "It would be unbecoming of a husband to not escort his wife back to the safe confines of her home. Allow me this just once."

You reluctantly nod, not wanting to bother him any further, resisting the heat creeping up your neck at his words. *He just casually throws in the 'wife' and 'husband' aspect of it so easily!* And having seen you fold, he pats your hand reassuringly. "I must admit, though, I don't know your address. You shall have to lead the way."

"Haha, well, it just happens to be a few blocks away." You point along the quiet street. "Just up ahead. How kind of you to keep me company for so long, Neuville. It must get awfully bothersome at times, no?"

"'Bothersome'?" He questions, tilting his head at you, seemingly perplexed by your wording. "Why would your company be bothersome?"

Oh, I don't know—maybe because this entire fiasco forced my presence to be a constant at your side? You eye him cautiously, equally confused at his reaction. *I find it so hard to understand how this man actually enjoys my company.*

"Well..." You're unsure of how to word it. "Surely you must grow tired of this situation at times, yes? As neither of us asked for this, and I don't believe I'm exactly the most exciting of people to be around."

"I really don't understand what you mean, [Name]." His words, laced with such sincerity, continue to perturb you. You see no lie nor any scorn in his slitted mauve eyes, ones always so clear and intense—always meeting your gaze without hesitation. "Do you think I'm annoyed by you? Well, I shall tell you right now—you're no burden. Didn't I already say that at the opera?"

Embarrassment at the reminder of your mental breakdown floods you, and you avert your gaze to stare at the pavement. "I guess so." *Ugh, enough about me. I can't make it look as if I'm trying to get attention and always wallowing in self-pity.* So you do as you always do—bottle it up, tuck it away and ignore your own feelings—ones that are always descending in that abysmal, downward spiral. *He's already got enough on his plate.* You pointedly ignore his concerned, compassionate stare—as if he *relates* to you, and it never fails to pierce you right where you're weak. "Anyway! Not to worry, that won't happen again. How did you find my brother? I apologise if he was rude."

Neuville remains silent for a moment, just gazing at you, before relieving you of his intent stare and sighing, respecting your wishes to drop the subject. "If he had not acted so protective and determined for your safety's sake, I would've been terribly disappointed." That makes you look at him, but he's staring ahead. "Your brother is a good man. I was not offended by him in the least. It was pleasing to see him care for you so much. Clearly, whatever happened to you five years ago..." the Iudex turns his head to look down at you then, eyes gentle. "Left a horrid scar on you, and your brother is determined to not let you get hurt again. He is the example of what family should be."

You blink at him, taken aback by the warmth in his gaze, the softness of his tone, and the kindness in his touch. *He seems so icy on the outside...* your eyes roam across his sharp features, taking in that cold beauty of his—searching his eyes for any hint of falsity, any pretence in his stare, and you find none. *But, in reality, he's such an empathetic man.*

“You profess to not understand human emotions well, Neuville.” You look him straight in the eyes and allow a rueful smile to mar your face. “But you are much, much more human than you give yourself credit for.”

You know he's not a human—if his long life, peculiar eyes and those pointed ears of his weren't an obvious enough sign—but his heart is. You see a man struggling to bear his burden, struggling to keep his brittle heart in one piece—and maybe that's why you're beginning to adore him like so. Because you *can* relate to him, as he relates to you.

Neuville stares at you, perturbed by your words—and you realise that you've both stopped in the middle of the street. In fact, you've both been standing there for a while, quietly having a deeply personal conversation, strengthening your understanding of each other. Silence reigns, the soft breeze brushing by, his silver locks swaying gently in the wind, his hand upon your cheek.

His gloved thumb tenderly caresses the roundness of your cheek, just under your eye. “Do you even understand what you're doing to me?”

You blink. “Oh, did I offend you—?”

“No.” Neuville smooths out some flyaway hairs on your head, tucking them behind your ear, smiling tenderly at you. “No, you didn't. I've never been told that before, and I didn't know that I needed to hear those words until now. It's...all I've wanted.” He averts his gaze to the side, hesitating. “I've...just wanted to be understood.” His voice is small, almost barely audible, deep and vulnerable.

You lift your hand up to hold his that rests against your cheek—and it happens to be your left hand, the streetlamps catching the diamonds of your engagement ring's light, glimmering in the darkness—something Neuville's eyes flits to briefly. “I'm glad that I am of some semblance of comfort to you, Neuville.” You take in his expression—though it seems to be positively glowing with happiness now, that subtle flicker of unadulterated sorrow never fades from his eyes. It haunts his gaze like the grasp of melancholy strangling him unceasingly, and it leaves your stomach coiling in despondency.

I want to erase that despair from him permanently, you think—and now, with your faces so close, you're able to see all the flecks of colours within his striking eyes—mixtures of lilac, periwinkle and, most prominently, amethyst; all swirled together in a brilliant, beautiful result of life and a direct glimpse into the purity of the Chief Justice's soul.

He takes your hands and gives it a squeeze, smiling kindly at you. “Yes. You've been a comfort to me for the past few months, in fact.”

You try not to blush. “Please, no need for the flattery. You've been exceptionally kind to me, Neuville.” You both begin walking again, the air more jovial. “May I ask why?”

“Do I need a reason?” He counters, tipping his head back to look up to the starry sky. “Don’t misunderstand me—I’ve no ulterior motives, and I understand why you would distrust me, but I do truly want to be your friend.”

You don’t reply, mulling over his words. *Oh well, time will tell whether he holds those same feelings for very long.* Part of you—*most* of you—dreads it, but you’ve come to accept the inevitable.

“So...we must appear like the perfect stellar couple to the public, but what about the act in front of Furina, like how Wriothesley suggested?”

Neuvillette notices your switch of topic, but does not comment on it, despite how much it pierces him on the inside. “...Yes, that is something we’ve still yet to discuss.” He considers requesting (well, *ordering*, really) for the Duke of Meropide to join you both in deliberating the matter, but he’d rather not have the man drop hints about his love life (or, lack thereof) and how he actually not-so-secretly wants Neuvillette to *also* learn to love a woman, and thus embarrass him greatly in front of his wife—someone he has found he does not want to be humiliated before.

“Hopefully it’ll prove successful in discouraging her. It’d be funny if she insisted we divorce *before* the twelve months are up.”

Neuvillette finds himself perplexed at your tone and expression—it seems jovial, as if delighted at the thought, but there’s a pinch in your brow; a twist to your lips. He wonders if it also mirrors how he feels inside—but, of course, neither of you will ever admit such a thing to each other. As that’s what the contract states, anyway.

“Ah, here it is.” You point towards a building of about three storeys. “My apartment is here.” You turn to the Iudex and give him a grateful smile. “Thank you for escorting me home, Neuvillette. Shall we continue our conversation another time?”

“Yes.” He nods, letting go of your arm and taking a polite step back, hands behind his back. “You said you can relocate to the Palais by the end of this week, yes? Well, see you then.”

“Of course. Have a good night, Neuvillette.” You bid him farewell with a smile and turn to enter the door of your apartment’s main floor, leaving the Chief Justice out on the street, waiting until you are gone.

And neither of you noticed the soft *click* of a Kamera going off nearby. At any rate, the sky remained clear that night, the Hydro Dragon too lost in thought to weep.

“You’re smiling more, [Name].”

It’s Friday, the day you move into the Palais, and you look up from the cardboard box you’re currently taping up to Navia, who holds a stack of books in her hands. Tilting your head at her, you look quizzically at her. “What do you mean?”

She stoops down and places them by another box, presently empty and waiting to be packed, straightening and looking you dead in the eye. “Have you always been this oblivious?”

You blink, somewhat offended by her words, still confused. “What on earth are you talking about? Have I not always been a smiley person?”

Navia studies your expression closely, taking in the genuine puzzlement on your face. *Five months ago, she was so sour—that, compared to all those years ago...* she shakes her head and brushes it off, leaving it for you to figure out for yourself eventually. “Nevermind. Want me to put that by the door?”

“Oh, yes, please.” You push the box towards her, and she leans down to grab it, heaving it up. You’ve always admired Navia’s sheer strength and independence—she’s the epitome of a self-made, headstrong woman, never allowing herself to be burdened down by the sexism of society, always demolishing those restricting stereotypes. Besides that, she always makes sure to deck out on fashion, never leaving her house without being dressed tastefully and to the nines; her makeup done with utmost precision, accentuating her beauty and charm even further. Not only that, but she swings that claymore around so effortlessly, harnessing her Geo Vision to its greatest capability. She runs the Spina du Rosula with an iron fist, and as Silver would say—*she has one good head screwed on her shoulders*.

Over the years, since the incident, she has been a loyal friend, sticking to your side, always making time for you even when she’s busy with her organisation. You appreciate her greatly, and you genuinely don’t believe you would’ve been able to move on so far without her.

Have I not always been a smiley person? No. You have not. Although you never let your unfortunate conditions as a child shape your future—now current—self, you’ve never made yourself out to be a happy person. You’re just...well, you’re just quiet, accommodating, and you know when to smile at the right times. But you don’t *feel* like smiling, so why should you.

How strange. She’s right—lately, I have been feeling happier.

It’s quite ironic, you think, considering your circumstances. Right at this very moment, you’re packing to move into the Palais Mermonia, the wing where the Iudex resides also. But you’re not dreading it. You’re not excited, but you don’t feel like running away. You chalk it up to just having accepted it, and that it isn’t anything more complex than that.

“Well, that’s the last box, isn’t it?” Navia brushes her hands together as if wiping dust from her gloves, kneeling down to help place the last few odds and ends into the final box you’re packing, taping up, and pushing aside, ready to go. “How do you feel?”

“Uh...it’s surreal, I guess,” you offer, shrugging, getting to your feet. “It’s only for a year, and that’ll go by in a blink. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I think you already know the answer to that question, the logical part of your brain hisses, and you frown in annoyance. Sure, but is it guaranteed? This is contractual, and it’s gonna stay that way. Neuville is just being polite, and so am I.

Considering the look on Navia's face, she seems to quite agree with that logical inner voice of yours; staring at you with those knowing baby blues of hers. Sometimes you forget just how well the Demoiselle knows you—how she can read you like a book, and never fails to point out how you constantly deny your circumstances, good or bad.

She once said that you're borderline pessimistic—but she never says any such thing without a kindly tone, conveying just how much of a sister you are to her, as she is to you. Her criticism is constructive, but it gets irritating how much that rational area of your mind sounds almost too much like her lilting voice sometimes.

“Don't look at me like that,” you mutter, feeling like a bug under a microscope. “Sure, a lot of things could go awry, but I'm trying to look on the bright side for once, okay? Cut me some slack.”

“What you consider ‘things that could go awry’, [Name]...” *Here we go.* You fight the urge to roll your eyes at the familiar tone Navia's taken on—that ‘big-sister’ voice she always uses on you when trying to make you see the reality of things—and begrudgingly listen. “Could prove to be very beneficial to your future.”

“*Please* stop talking in riddles, Navia,” you sigh wearily, rubbing a hand over your face. “It's really not helping me out here—”

“No, you know what I mean, you're just refusing to acknowledge it,” she responds, placing a hand on your shoulder and making you look at her. “Why do you think I've been trying to hitch you up with someone? I'm not invalidating your feelings, but it *has* been five years. I know it still hurts, I do, but Neuville's a good guy—and ever since you two have been speaking, you've been smiling a lot more. *This* is what I want for you.”

You open your mouth to reply, but a soft knock at the door interrupts you. Turning, you set eyes upon an embarrassed-looking Iudex, his hand still raised at the door frame, considering how it has been open to heave stuff out since you began packing, his posture uncertain.

Oh, Archons, no—did he hear everything? Just wonderful. You send a swift, murderous glare in Navia's direction, and she widens her eyes at you as if to say, *I didn't see him! Don't kill me just yet.*

“Aha...Neuville, you're here early.” You try to make conversation, slowly turning back to face him, acting as if he *didn't* likely just overhear a very personal debate of your feelings for the very man at your door, his back stiff, shoulders squared—also acting as if he heard nothing—and you attempt a welcoming smile. “I, uh...didn't expect you so soon.”

You hear Navia soft intake of breath—clearly trying to hold back her laughter—and you step closer to subtly yank at one of the two golden curls framing her face. She squeaks quietly, and you focus on the Chief Justice again, who is presently clearing his throat.

“I don't believe I'm *early*...” A pocket watch emerges from some pocket of his, and he gives it a brief glance. “You did say twelve-thirty, did you not...?”

“Oh, of course, yes, I did, haha...” *Shall I end my life here, now?* You’re feeling quite like flinging yourself off of one of Fontaine’s high cliffs, but you hold that smile up best you possibly can for now. “I beg your pardon, I lost track of time.”

“Oh, no need for apologies.” The Iudex waves it off, slipping his watch back to wherever it came from. “The carriage is reading, if you would like to load your belongings onto it now.”

“My men ought to have done that already.” Navia pats your shoulder, the glint in her eyes promising revenge for pulling at her hair, and she strides past you, stooping down to lift the final box left. “Shall we, *Madame Neuville*?”

If Neuville had been drinking something, he’d assuredly have choked and/or spat it out at Navia’s words—considering just how pink his cheeks have become, his mauve eyes wide. And you...well, you’re the same, at a true loss for words, mouth agape.

“Anyway!” Navia cheerfully approaches Neuville, looking way too accomplished and pleased with herself—and he has just enough wits about him to step aside, letting her pass, eyes on the ground, ears burning. “Let’s see how Silver and Melus are faring, yes? I’ll leave you two lovebirds to your own devices. Don’t take too long now!”

It takes much strength to keep yourself from falling to the floor in a faint, horrified at Navia’s *implications*—when she knows all too well just where this ‘marriage’ stands, and its status.

“Has she been meeting Furina in private?” Neuville blinks at you, and you place your face in your palms, unsure of where to put yourself, cheeks aflame. “I don’t know—” your words are muffled by your hands. “She better not have. I’ll have her head if so.”

“Uh, well...she’s certainly quite the...jester.” Neuville looks terribly indecisive, and you feel awful. In a desperate effort to diffuse the heavily awkward atmosphere, you gesture to the door. “Shall we? I need to make sure Navia isn’t blabbing her mouth about this to Silver and Melus. You know how she is.”

Actually, Neuville doesn’t, as he’s had only a handful of interactions with her, but he knows enough to understand you. “Of course. Would you like to dine together later? To pick up the conversation where we left off a few days ago?”

“If you’d like.” You nod, and you both begin to saunter down the hallway together, heading for the stairs down. “I’m sure you’re just dying to share more imported water with me, also.”

You’re only teasing, but Neuville’s expression lights up, taking your words in earnest. You find the sight adorable. “You would care to try them out with me? How wonderful. I’ve already tried a few, and they are *quite* exquisite. I think you’d enjoy them.”

“Do you like any other beverages, Neuville?” You don’t recall seeing him drinking any champagne at the ball, nor have you witnessed him with any coffee in his office. He seems to have a very strong preference for water.

“Hm. Tea is alright, I sometimes accept Wriothesley’s offer of one whenever I visit the Fortress of Meropide on business...but, well, I can’t say I do. If I feel like a drink, I just have

water.”

“What about Fonta? Have you tried it?”

Neuvillette looks positively *horrified* at the suggestion. “Fonta? Yes, I have tried it, but... well, I can’t say I understand its appeal. I suppose it would taste nice to you humans, but I think water is quite fine *without* any artificial flavouring.”

His polite words and soft-spoken tone clashes head-on with his expression—clearly, he holds the beverage in very low regard, and likely detests it. Chuckling, you shake your head at him, amused by his antics. “How curious you are, Neuvillette. What other little quirks do you have that the public would, and will never, know about?”

He tilts his head, and if he were a puppy, you think his ears would’ve twitched in question adorably. “‘Quirks’? No, I don’t believe I’m that interesting of a person to have any other ‘quirks’. My usual day is spent either overseeing trials, doing paperwork, perhaps going for the odd walk along the shoreline, and drinking water.”

“Well, do you like reading? Writing? *Poetry*?”

“If a book interests me, I will read it. And no, I’m not much of a writer—*poetry*, on the other hand...” He gives you a knowing smirk, amused at your mention of your little shared inside joke. “I’ve met quite a few renowned poets throughout my lifetime, and I believe I could learn from them, if you want me to write you poetry.”

“I would be delighted.” You move to push the front entrance door open, but Neuvillette holds it for you first, and you thank him before you both step outside. “Maybe you could write about how much the scenery reminds you of me when out on your little walks across the countryside.”

He chuckles at your teasing. “I shall keep that in mind. Perhaps you can join me and we’ll serenade each other.”

“Goodness! What a jokester you are,” you laugh, patting his arm in a friendly fashion. “All the rumours about you being cold and heartless are so untrue. What a pleasant surprise.”

“You two! Everything’s all ready to go.” Navia waves and approaches you both, interrupting your banter. “I see you’re chatting away quite jovially here. Anyway—” she turns to you, pulling you in for a hug. “Have a good one, [Name]. Remember...” she leans forward and whispers something in your ear.

You squeeze your eyes shut and shake your head, sighing. Navia grins smugly. “Navia, seriously?”

“Oh, yeah.” She glances slyly at a perplexed Neuvillette. “Thank me later.”

She swiftly turns away and jogs off for Silver and Melus, leaving you bewildered and, frankly, weary. Neuvillette notices your trepidation, and mercifully does not inquire as to what she said to you, instead gesturing towards the carriage. “After you, [Name].”

“Oh, of course.” You are snapped from your thoughts and you start off for the carriage. “Let’s go. Just ignore her. She can be an idiot sometimes.”

Neuville’s silence tells you more than enough, and soon you’re both seated within the carriage, heading off for the Palais.

Chapter End Notes

let's just ignore how I made a mistake and put the engagement ring on reader's right hand instead of the traditional left finger...oh well, moving on <3

I hope im not overdoing it with the banter between reader and neuville. are you guys enjoying it? is it moving too fast? im doing this mainly because I cannot stand writing filler chapters (want a writer's block? write filler chapters <3) and well...it's so FUN to write bruh

left off on a bit of a cliffhanger because...we gotta keep y'all on your toes, right? heheheuehye 🤔

thank you guys for reading and all the sweet messages <3

— aller de travers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neuvillette has sharp ears.

Perhaps it's because of their peculiar, inhuman shape, and thus helps him receive sound waves the average human cannot.

No. It's simply that he is not a human at all. As we all know, he's the Hydro Sovereign, born from the remnants of a Divine Dragon long lost. Besides, he'd been able to hear Paimon hissing to the Traveller about him in the Epiclese right before Lyney and Lynette's show—and before disaster struck.

So, suffice to say, he heard good and well what Navia whispered into your ear, leaving your cheeks flushed red—and the back of his neck and ears burning.

However, he masked it, seeing your clear discomfit and hope he had not caught Navia's words; choosing to shelve it overthink later, he suggested the two of you heading off.

Now, he is helping unload the few (heavy) boxes of your belongings into your new room. He had personally selected this room—two halls away from his own, as he had a feeling you'd appreciate—and by the look on your face, Neuvillette is sure you're pleased with the room.

It is a moderately sized room, but its expansive windows looking out onto the harbour and the sunlight it lets pour in makes the place seem more voluminous. He stands aside, out of the way of the movers, carefully watching your reactions.

Your eyes are wide, sparkling, darting all over the place and taking in every detail. The canopy bed with a king-sized mattress and a floral, gold-hemmed duvet; the plush rug splayed neatly upon the mahogany flooring; polished bookshelves lining the walls, already half-filled with books he had picked out himself based on personal favourites; and the intricate paintings on the ceilings, depicting great feats of Fontainian heroes in the past and the Archons' awesome endeavours during eras of calamity. You place a box down by the bookshelf, straightening, mouth agape in awe.

“Neuvillette.” He inclines his head in your direction to show his attention, something that goes unnoticed by you, as you're too busy ogling your new room to show your descry. “Did you say you picked out this room yourself?”

One of the movers steps forward, tipping his hat in respect, apologetic for interrupting. “Monsieur, Madame, everything's unloaded now. We'll take our leave.”

“Oh, thank you,” you reply, still taking in the entire room. “Have a lovely rest of your day.”

The men click the door shut on their way out, and Neuville promptly answers your previous question. “Yes. I thought it would suit you. Do you like it?”

“Oh, yes.” You’re a bit breathless with reverence. “It’s wonderful. The sort of room I read about in fairytales as a child, something I never imagined having ever the chance to live in for myself.” *Too bad it’s for a year*, you think glumly, stepping towards the windows, where the breeze gently lifts the sheer curtains. You gaze outside, towards the breathtaking view of the sea.

Neuville feels terribly relieved. “I’m glad. If you wish for any rearrangements, simply call on the head maid. She will do all she can to fulfil your request.”

“It’s perfect as it already is.” *Why would I renovate when I’m only here for a year?* “I see the books already here.” You turn to face him. “Whose are they?”

“...Mine.” He can’t quite put a finger on why he feels embarrassed. “They’re the books I have enjoyed thoroughly throughout my long years. Not all of them are fictional, by the way. I just thought...you might appreciate some new reads.”

Neuville has to resist squirming at the intensity of your gaze as you stare at him. It’s a look he has great trouble reading, and he doesn’t know why his ears feel flushed.

“Thank you, Neuville,” you eventually say after a drawn-out moment of silence. You turn towards the bookshelves. “Considering how well you appear to understand my taste in things, I’m sure our preferences in literature will be no different.”

He watches as you run your fingertips lightly over the spines of the books, head tilted to the side to read the books’ titles. “There are a good many here. And you said they’re ones you’ve collected over the years.” The look you give him is what he presumes to be ‘excitement’. “And you’ve lived a long time. How many of these books are antiques, or centuries old?”

“Some are ones that I’ve not seen in bookstores for a good 150 years,” he responds, stepping forward to pull one out that is roughly four-hundred years old. The book looks old and well-read, considering its worn spine and yellowed pages. It has the distinct scent of an aged book, a smell you adore, and it creaks as he cracks it open. You aren’t able to catch its title, as the cover is also worn down. “This was a gift from a Melusine centuries ago.” An expression of distant sadness washes over Neuville’s face. “She...ended her own life to disprove some cruel accusations against her. You see, I was only just instigated as Iudex back then, and Melusines had recently entered Fontainian society as citizens. The humans were very distrustful of both I and the Melusines, leading to...violent discrimination.” Neuville’s Adam’s apple bobs as he pauses, a knot forming between his brows. His eyes are lowered towards the book, long lashes obscuring the amethyst of his eyes and thus the sentiments within them. “It was a dark time for the Melusines and myself. I had to put a close friend of mine away in the Fortress as a result, for he was falsely accused also. That’s why...I am, essentially, putting much trust in you by lending you this book.”

He lifts it towards you, and you refuse to take it. “Neuville, if it’s that important of a book to you, then there is no reason for you to give it to me. To accept such a personal item is—”

“Well, take it as a confirmation of my sincere wish to be your friend.” He pushes it into your hands. “There is no need for awkward air or any walking on eggshells between us. We’re going to have to brave the next twelve months joined at the hip, no? We must learn to trust and rely on one another to successfully get through this.”

You lower your eyes towards the book, finally accepting it. You lightly brush your fingers over the faded gold lettering of what once was the title, feeling the rough leatherette cover under your fingertips. “What was the book’s title, Neuville?”

“It’s called *The Soul of a Human*. It’s about human emotions and how they work. It’s likely an outdated work, as it is about four centuries old. Either way, the book was an awesome help toward me fitting in with society, making the populace trust me as Iudex, and furthering my understanding of human emotions...but, it’s still something I struggle with.”

“If you aren’t a human, then what are you, Neuville?”

If there is a question Neuville has been dreading you to eventually ask, it would be this one. *How do I explain who I am without telling her my true identity?* So he settles for a safer route, something maybe a bit more believable. “I am...a Melusine hybrid.”

I suppose it’s marginally better than telling her I’m the Hydro Sovereign. But he can tell that you do not believe him, which you waste no time in voicing. “No, you’re not, Neuville. Is there even such thing as a ‘Melusine hybrid’? I know you are not telling the truth.”

Neuville has never been quite put on the spot before as now, with your direct calling out of his little white lie. What an embarrassing look for a man who is supposed to be the embodiment of honesty. *He’s* the one who told you he is ‘not predisposed to lying’. He even told the Traveller that he’s more than capable of distinguishing flavour differences between each region’s water—something the Traveller lifted a sceptical brow to, and he gave it to them straight that he ‘is the Iudex’ and that he ‘does not lie’.

So. Although he *was* telling the truth then, it’s quite humiliating how quick you just saw through his lie. He swallows and looks away, fighting back a blush. “Haha...how embarrassing. The truth is...”

“You can’t tell me?” You offer, giving him an understanding smile. “That’s okay. You could’ve just said that, you know. We’re not obligated to tell each other anything personal.”

He looks up at you through his lashes, tilting his head. “That is true. Thank you for being understanding.” Neuville draws in a deep breath, letting it out in a heavy sigh through his nose, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “I don’t think anyone else would’ve been suited for this role other than you. It is rare to find someone with as level a head as yours.”

“I suppose so.” Despite your outwardly calm appearance, the inside is a much different story. With your tendency to bottle up your deepest emotions, to call yourself ‘level-headed’ would be almost an overstatement. You’ve been in a very serious life-or-death situation before, something that has left its unfading mark on you, and to say you were ‘level-headed’ or even ‘rational’ would be a bald-faced lie. You suppose that anyone getting strangled by their fiancé would be pretty inclined to panicking—but, the point is, although you *seem* circumspect and

grounded, your inner sentiments are the opposite, and they're always fighting to burst out of you.

And they have, a few times. The aftermath was ugly.

Neuvillette has fallen silent, staring at you, as if watching your expressions, and that makes you school your features in one of careful, impeccable neutrality, almost detachment. "Now, what about dinner tonight?"

"Ah, yes." That look in his eye hasn't disappeared—a look where he can seemingly see right through you, and isn't fooled by your blank expressions. "I dine at eight. How does that sound?"

"Fine." You nod, offering a small smile. "You should take this chance to show me your water collection."

The Chief Justice raises a brow, an amused smile pricking at the corners of his mouth. "You make it sound like such a joke. But, I will take you up on that. I doubt you've tried authentic Natlanian-heated Snezhnayan water before. The combination is unexpected, but quite pleasing to the palate."

"Goodness, Neuvillette." You place a hand upon your heart in faux-shock, giving him a look of mock-distress. "You will drain the Palais of its funds if you keep importing all this water and heating it in *real* Natlanian fire and chilling it in *genuine* Snezhnayan ice!"

He plays along—something you've found yourself very grateful for. Not many get your sense of humour, but the Iudex does. All your attempts at jesting were frequently met with blank, awkward side glances and suffocating silence. Your humour changed from one of true heartiness to dark absurdity upon the events of five years ago.

For a while, you didn't have a sense of humour at all. For a time it felt like there was no need to laugh, smile or joke. That there was no point in doing so, because there was nothing happy about life and living anymore.

Maybe it's part of the reason for your inexplicable sense of comfort and safety around the man. He may not be much of a smiler, but he does have a sense of humour. He knows how to appreciate a joke—although, more often than not, he's a bit clueless. Wriothesley's jokes go right over his head, more often than not.

That led you to believe that maybe, just maybe, he's as comfortable around you as you are him. That *maybe*, he understands you intimately, and always knows you mean no harm.

"Uh oh. I've been found out," Neuvillette says in a deliberately overly monotone voice. "I'm so scared. How will I ever go on without my water?"

"Don't they give you a glass a day down in the Fortress?" Frankly, you know nothing of how prisoners are treated in Meropide, and you're not sure if you want to find out. At any rate, it's humorous and utterly unrealistic to imagine the Iudex in such a place—a thought to which he

himself chuckles. “Oho, I can assure you the Duke is much more merciful on the convicts than that. Either way, it would still be torture.”

Hm, okay... This entire time, you’ve, in a way, been fishing—trying to dig into *why* Neuville likes water so much, and how he doesn’t seem to complain about having to go to the toilet all the time, *and* how he lied about his true identity. So, you’ve concluded vaguely, that he must be some kind of Hydro being.

Oh well, better not read into it too much. It’s not your place, nor your business, as strictly stated by the contract. Besides, it’s clear the Chief Justice doesn’t want you knowing—if he’d even go against his own principles and lie about it.

You chalk it up to having just taken him off guard, forcing him to lie as he searched for a plausible excuse *not* to reveal himself to you.

“What time do you leave for your office in the mornings?” You change the topic, turning away from the bookshelf and for a box, kneeling to open it up. “Maybe we could have breakfast together.”

“I awake at 5AM, and leave at six-thirty,” he answers, tone somewhat apologetic, and you can’t fathom why. “I would never expect you to get up so early to join me—”

“That’s a perfectly normal hour to get up, Neuville.” If you were a morning person, your stomach maybe *wouldn’t* have dropped at the thought of having to get up at *dawn* to have breakfast with him. “My shift at the boutique begins at seven in the morning, so it’s not too ungodly of an hour to get up.”

“Don’t feel obligated, [Name]. I don’t have very big breakfasts anyway.”

He knows he’s said the wrong thing the instant you swivel around to look at him, face incredulous. “So that’s why you’ve been looking so gaunt! Neuville, you can’t live off of water alone.” You stand and place your hands on your hips, face stern. “Let me guess, for breaks you just have water also? No food? Do you ever eat full meals?”

“I—of course, I do.” Neuville feels strangely touched with how genuinely concerned you appear; brows upturned and lips pursed, jaw tight. He doesn’t know why the sight pierces him. “I’m not unhealthy, and you really needn’t worry for me.”

“How can I not?” He feels pierced once more, and you turn away from him with a hand over your face. “You’re the Iudex. You’ve got one hell of a burden on your shoulders, and you’re not even eating large breakfasts! The most important meal of the day! Neuville.” You whirl around once more, stepping closer and pointing a finger at his chest. You could be more intimidating if you were taller. The man positively *towers* over you. “You are my husband, and it’s a wife’s basic duty—and a *friend’s*—to worry for their companion’s health. And you tell me not to worry?”

Maybe I am overreacting, but it does his pretty face no good to have those eyebags! Yet, you suppose it’s nice to see him in such a *human* state. It’s strangely attractive. “You have higher

chances of getting sick when malnourished, so don't even *think* of wandering out about in the rain."

Having silently stared at you while you were scolding him, the Iudex finally lets out a chuckle, raising his hand to take gentle hold of your pointer finger that is lightly nudging his chest. He lifts your hand to his lips, placing a chaste, gracious kiss to the top of it. You almost fall back in surprise. "I will keep your concerns in mind, dearest. Thank you."

Despite his reassurance, your worries are not eased. You also pointedly ignore the blood rushing in your hearts from your thumping heart and his unintentional suaveness. "I-I trust you'll eat proper breakfasts? And get full nights of sleep?"

Neuvillette gently lets go of your hand. You quickly realise how close you both are, and you take a quick step back to put more polite distance between the two of you, hiding behind your hair to obscure your flushed face. "I will try. Sometimes, my thoughts grow too loud, and I take midnight strolls."

"I hope you dress warmly." You're beginning to wonder if you even have any right to be so concerned for him. This marriage is *contractual*, but you're already acting like a nagging, forty-year-old housewife.

"Really, there's no need for you to feel so concerned for me. My body is quite adapted to the coldness of rain."

"...Alright." You try to persuade yourself that you're just worried for him as a sister would fret over the wellbeing of her brother. "Well, then. Shall I see you at dinner?"

"Oh, yes." Neuvillette quickly understands your words' implications. He now must leave you to adjust to your room on your own. "Until this evening, [Name]. Have a lovely rest of your day."

You don't really know what to wear for tonight. You're kicking yourself over not specifying with him about whether it would be formal, semi-formal, or just casual...so, you opt to dress the former, selecting a comfortable pair of black dress pants and a white button-up blouse with puffy long sleeves. You pop in two jewelled stud earrings for minimal embellishment, and brush your hair out, leaving it down.

You stare at yourself for a long moment in the body-length mirror before you. This time last year, your eyes would've been sunken, lifeless, lips chapped and set permanently in a grim line. Now, even though you have little makeup on, you look...lighter. You don't look so tired anymore. Those haunted shadows in your eyes are almost traceless, and your cheeks are full with health, your cheekbones not so prominent anymore.

You're smiling more, [Name].

You do a couple of poses in the mirror to fully assess your outfit for the evening, eventually ending up pleased with it. The pants look good on you, and, for the first time in years, you feel pretty.

I'm finally moving on from that man for good. In the last moments of your relationship—and what you thought were of your life—he made sure you knew how repulsive he found you. The insecurities have not faded, but you take comfort in the fact that Neuvillette has never looked at you with a sickened stare. He's never seemed displeased with your presence.

With one final once-over of yourself in the mirror, you glance at the clock and quickly exit your room, trying to remember the way to the dining room. The Palais Mermonia itself is a maze, and Neuvillette's wing of the building is no less of a labyrinth.

You spot a maid nearby, drawing the hall curtains closed for the night. "Um, excuse me, miss—could you please direct me to the dining room?"

The woman turns, surprised, before pointing along the hall. "Of course. Just go along here, take two lefts and then you'll find a set of double doors."

"Thank you." You quickly send her a grateful smile and hurry off, hoping you're not late. How embarrassing would it be to reveal that you'd been too busy admiring yourself in the mirror to arrive on time?

After a few moments, you arrive at the double doors the maid mentioned, and you politely knock on them. It's swiftly opened, and there is Neuvillette, seated upon a chair before an average-sized dining table—neatly set out with a sea-blue tablecloth and cushioned seats—in the middle of taking a sip from his goblet of, presumably, water.

The food is already laid out, but the Chief Justice clearly has not touched it. He was likely waiting for you, and seeing the clock, you're an embarrassing five minutes late. "My apologies, Neuvillette, I got a bit lost."

"No worries at all." He smiles and stands, pulling out your chair for you and stepping aside for you to sit. The gentlemanly act takes you pleasantly off-guard. "The food was only just set out seconds before you arrived."

"Ah, so it's still warm, then," you muse, watching a male servant step forward to place your entrées before you—creamy chicken and onion soup. "Goodness! This is like eating at Hotel Debord."

"The chef is a master at soups." Part of why he hired the cook. He softly blows on his spoonful of soup, quickly swallowing it before speaking again. "He is eagerly awaiting your feedback."

You let out a pleased hum once you taste the dish. "Very delicious. I dare say, the benefits of this little arrangement Furina forced on us is piling up."

You're inwardly relieved when Neuvillette chuckles at your jest. Of course, you *are* joking—but then again, if you're able to eat like this for the next twelve months... "Don't get too comfortable. She's already demanded for us to meet, as she's got our first event to attend ready for us."

You grow solemn at his words. “She has? Oh. Shall we not talk about such dull matters at present, Neuville? It will ruin our appetites.”

The Iudex quite agrees with you. “Of course. How are you finding your room?”

“It’s wonderful, Neuville.” It’s the kind of room illustrated in all those old fairy tale classics you read as a child—a room fit for a queen. “It has such a lovely view of the harbour.”

“You should see the gardens.” You look at him, surprised at his words. “There’s a garden?”

“Of course. This is the Palais.” Neuville smiles at you amusedly. “There is a fountain. And no light pollution reaches the area, so you’re able to see the stars vividly.”

What if I told him that I want to stay here forever? And you haven’t even lived here for a day. In fact, you’re a bit overwhelmed. “Will I see you getting rained on out there at night, Neuville?”

His mauve eyes flit away, hiding behind his hair. “...That depends.”

You laugh under your breath at the sight. The man, despite having been a judge for hundreds of years, is so surprisingly innocent. It’s a cute quality you like about him. “I’m amazed you’ve never experienced a fever from it.”

“I just...don’t understand how strange it seems.” He appears genuinely puzzled. “The people of Fontaine always give me weird looks whenever I stroll through a downpour along the streets. Is it really so outlandish that a man just wants to be left to his thoughts in the rain?”

“I suppose it’s because, as humans, we catch colds, Neuville.” You lift the last spoonful of soup in your bowl to your lips. “Getting caught in the rain is the quickest way to catch a chill. And they’re awfully unpleasant.”

“Even when you have an umbrella?”

“Well, there’s less of a chance,” you concede, murmuring a soft thanks to the servant that steps forward to retrieve your bowl, preparing for the main course. “I’m happy to join you, as long as I either have a raincoat or umbrella on hand.”

Neuville looks pleased at your suggestion. “A bit of company would be nice. Furina must never find out, though.”

“Oh, yes.” If you are to put up your act successfully, then it is imperative she remains in the dark. “Anyway, I wonder how the public will react to the news of your marriage?”

“The tabloids will probably make it way bigger of a deal than it truly is.” Neuville's expression looks resigned. “And we will bear the brunt. You must prepare yourself.”

“Yes...” You stare blankly at your fork. “I’ll probably have to apply for leave at the boutique.” It’s quite dismaying, having to anticipate your privacy being stripped from you all

because of the impulsive whims of a spontaneous archon.

“Don’t worry, as the contract stated, you will be protected.” Although, inside, Neuville is worried bodyguards won’t be enough. “No harm will come to you.”

“I can just sue them if they do overstep their mark.” The Steambird, as an example, is notoriously imposing, and bombardment from their journalists is guaranteed. “Is this what the Traveller deals with each day? No wonder they quickly head off to their next location as soon as they can.”

“Fame is a costly reward.” A long-suffering look passes over the Iudex’s handsome face. “For some, it is no prize.”

You understand his quiet referral to himself and the reception he has due to his exalted position within Fontaine and, essentially, Teyvat. “Perhaps some such as Furina, who revels in it, just cannot understand such a concept.”

Neuville considers your words for a brief moment. “Hm. Yes, you could say that. However...” He trails off as lidded platters with the main course prepared inside is placed upon the table. “There is much more to her than what first meets the eye. I’ve known her for a very long time, and she is certainly no superficial girl.”

That makes you fall into a thoughtful silence, just watching the servants bustle about. One finally lifts the platter lids, letting the hot food’s steam billow out, your pondering quietude broken. The aroma is heavenly. “Oh, my—a lamb roast? You spoil me!”

Neuville thanks the servant as the man bows and steps to the side. The lamb is already sliced, the meat cooked to perfection. “Of course. Help yourself.”

You notice that many of the dishes presented have a lot of sauce with them. You don’t mind—every dish smells divine and you’re quick to load up your plate. “What’s for dessert?” You’re unsure if you’ll be able to fit it in.

“I don’t usually have dessert, but I had a cake prepared for you.” He taps a serving spoon against the edge of a bowl to rid it of excess sauce. “A black forest layer cake. Is that alright?”

“Like I would complain,” you amusedly quip once you’d finished your mouthful. “And this sweet potato is exceptional, Neuville, do try some—”

A sharp knock at the door cuts you off, making the two of you pause in your tracks. Neuville sends a bemused glance to the nearby servant, who quickly opens the door.

A man stumbles in, hastily adjusting his spectacles and trying to neaten his flustered, unkempt appearance. A bolt of unease shoots through you at the sight, leaving no room to be offended at his abrupt and rude entrance during your meal.

“Monsieur Neuville!” He breathlessly exclaims, waving a newspaper around. “I am terribly sorry for the interruption, but this is urgent, and you were preoccupied today.”

“It’s alright.” Neuvillette dabs at his mouth with a napkin and stands, quietly approaching the disoriented man. “You may relax. What is it?”

“This, sir.” The man hands over the newspaper, and Neuvillette accepts it, curiously straightening it out and beginning to read the front page. “We’ve no idea how or when this was taken, and it’s all over the headlines—”

“[Name]. You must see this.” The absence of emotion in the tone of his voice sends a jarring chill down your spine and you quickly stand, making your way toward him. “What’s wrong?”

He silently hands the paper to you, and you feel your stomach plummet at the sight of the front page.

“Chief Justice Neuvillette caught with mystery woman on Tuesday evening. Is the ever-impartial Iudex not so impartial anymore?” You shakily read out the words, turning to look up at him with wide eyes. “This was when you were walking me home a few days ago. We didn’t even notice! I thought the street was empty.”

He lays a firm hand on your shoulder, giving a soft, comforting squeeze. “Don’t panic. I know how to twist this to our advantage. It is too early, yes, and this could become a major problem, but we mustn’t worry.” The Chief Justice gently pries the newspaper from your trembling hands, and you stare at the ground. “I think you’d best turn in for the night, [Name]. We shall discuss this in the morning.”

“It’s not like I’ll sleep anyway,” you mutter, shoulders slumped. “Alright. I’ll do as you say. But *first* thing tomorrow morning, we will talk about this.”

He extracts his hand from you, and you attempt to give him a reassuring smile. “Have a good evening, Neuvillette. Relay my thanks to the chef about the food for me, please.”


Neuvillette answers with a quiet “I will” before you exit the dining room, making your way back to your bedroom.

I’m sure it’s just a minor setback, you think you’re going to throw up. He’ll take care of it. He said he would.

But maybe this was the first of things to go awry.

Chapter End Notes

hello hello, I am finally back with chapter nine <3

sorry for the two-week wait guys, it's been hectic. I have family coming up for Christmas and little time to Christmas shop, AND I got hit by a writer's block. also im so sorry if you were expecting a longer chapter because of the lengthy wait. I just couldn't be bothered to write as much this time 

and I did say two chapters before Christmas, but im gonna have to go back on that one too. in fact, this is the last chapter until january. I need a break haha. I hope you guys understand.

and if anything didn't make sense in this chapter, please attribute it towards my sleep deprivation. it hasn't gotten any less worse 💔

well, then, everyone. I wish you all a very merry Christmas (if you celebrate it) and a happy new year! I can't wait to continue this story with you all next year 💕💕

thank you all, and until 2024.

— luttēs

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

From what sleep you did get that night, it was fitful and brief. When you awoke, the first thing you felt was the splitting headache and the dreadfully familiar sensation in your lower region. Groaning, you rub your eyes and push the blankets off of you, heading for the ensuite connected to your room.

I wake up with a headache and I've begun my period. You have no patience this morning, and so you roughly yank open the drawer with your clothes within and hastily select your attire for today. *Of all days! I have to discuss this whole newspaper fiasco with Neuville and apply for leave at Chiori's Boutique!* If waking up to your monthly cycle and a headache isn't a bad omen, you don't know what is.

You jerk a brush through your hair, considering covering up the circles beneath your eyes with concealer. From the clock in your room, you observe how you have in fact woken up at your usual time, and you whirl around to grab a piece of paper, jot down a note for a servant to deliver to Neuville about how you must let Chiori know of your absence again today, and rush out.

Once you ensured the note would be presented to the Iudex, you quickly slowed to a walk due to the discomfort of your period, your gait slightly uneven.

You heave a sigh, taking a swift turn and heading down the street, towards the boutique. You know that Chiori will really start to get irritated with your frequent half-days of work that are growing more common nowadays. With how much more busy you're only going to get, it seems like you'll probably have to resign.

You reach the boutique's entrance and push open the door, the bell above the door jingling. There is Chiori, behind the front desk, scribbling away at a piece of paper, not even bothering to look up. "Welcome. Feel free to browse around and ask any one of our staff for anything."

You only just caught her low mutter of, 'it'd be great if you didn't come here at the crack of dawn though', before rapping your knuckles lightly on the counter's wood. "Hey, Chiori."

Her head snapped up, and she paused on whatever design she was sketching. "Oh, here you are." Chiori gave you her classic look—side-eye with the most unimpressed expression humanly possible. "Let me guess, you're here to tell me you can't come in today?"

"...Yeah, I'm sorry." It's taking everything within you to keep your manner easy-going and apologetic. You currently feel like throwing a chair at anything that moves, no matter who it could be. "You see...my current personal circumstances aren't only keeping me on my toes, it's shoving me face-first into the ground. I know I'm overdoing it now...which is why..."

“You’re applying for leave,” Chiori sighs, finishing your words for you. She crosses her arms and shakes her head. “Just make sure it doesn’t last too long. I can give you five weeks.” You understand that’s the usual annual leave legally given to those having worked at their job for over a year, like you, and you’re getting it earlier than normal. Chiori eyes you, her lips pursed. “If your current circumstances continue on longer than that...I’ll have to let you go.”

“Understandable.” You don’t know why, but you refrain from telling her that this predicament is going to last way longer than five weeks. “Thanks, Chiori. Again, I’m sorry.”

Chiori gives you a rare, tiny smile. “Don’t apologise. You can’t help it.” You’re surprised at not how understanding she’s being, but how lenient. And she hardly ever smiles. “Let me just get the papers.” She turns to head behind the curtain.

With every minute that passes by, your headache worsens and you begin to sweat from the pain from both ends of your body. Your period has never been a walk in the park—almost every time you begin your cycle, you’re practically bedridden for the first and second day. But, sometimes, life doesn’t let you rest, and so you must bear it despite the risk of fainting.

Rubbing your eyes, you release a tired breath, just wishing you could fall back into bed. *Dammit, I have so much to do today.* You’re worried you’re actually going to throw a chair at someone—especially Neuville. Your patience is already thin even when you’re not on your cycle, but now, it’s nonexistent.

Chiori soon emerges from the back room with a pen and paper in hand. “Here we are.” She places both items on the counter before you. “Go ahead with it and leave it there. See you around?” “Sure.” You quickly sign your signature on the dotted line, officially on leave. You’re running very low on energy. “Thanks for understanding, Chiori. Have a good day.”

She waves a goodbye, turning back to her work, and you quickly exit the boutique, heading off for the Palais. Not before stopping at a café first to get a strong dose of caffeine. You’ll need something to energise you, and something to soothe your simmering nerves before you strangle someone.

You plan to make the talk with Neuville as brief as possible so you can pass out on your new, beautifully comfortable bed for the rest of the day. Not without grabbing a hot water bottle first, of course, and satisfying your sudden, incoming craving for apricots.

After getting your coffee, you resume your trek towards the Palais, sipping on the warm liquid inside the cup and trying not to overthink the headlines of the Iudex’s supposed paramour—which, really, isn’t ‘supposed’; it’s true, but contractual—and the looks from the gestionnaires once you enter the Palais’ lobby.

Well, I guess I am much more recognisable than I was in the photo snapped at the ball. Then again, it’s too early for the public to know of Neuville’s ‘marriage’ just yet—but you can only trust he’ll handle it.

You approach Sedene. “Hello. Is Monsieur Neuville available?” “Ah! Madame!” The little Melusine looks up from her paperwork with a cute smile. “Welcome, welcome—and I’m sorry, but he is currently in a meeting with the captain of the Maison Gardiennage. It won’t

take long. Care for some tea?” “No, thank you, Sedene.” You attempt a smile at her, forcing yourself to be amicable—and it isn’t hard, as the little creature is just so adorable. “I’ve just had some coffee.” *Is it just me, or have the Melusines been getting friendlier and friendlier?* A couple of them called and waved a hello this morning as you strolled through the streets, wishing you and Neuvilleite a good morning.

“Alright, then, have a seat over here. You look a little pale, Madame. Would you like some water instead?”

Maybe having caffeine with a headache wasn’t such a good idea. Your head feels like it’s about to explode, and the mention of water sounds appealing. “Okay, I’ll have some water.” “No need to fetch it, Sedene. I have water in my office she can have.”

You both look up in surprise—there stands Neuvilleite, his amethyst hues roving over your complexion with clear concern. “[Name], you don’t look well at all. Did the news upset you that much? Did you not sleep well?”

“Uh, I just have a headache.” You aren’t about to tell him that your cycle is adding a great deal to it. You somehow doubt he’d have no idea how to ease the pain of period cramps—not that you’d ask him, anyway. You wonder if he even knows what menstruation is. “And no, I didn’t sleep very well. Not because of the bed—it was lovely. I was just worried.”

“That’s understandable.” He continues to observe you worriedly, and you’re beginning to feel like a bug under a microscope. You quickly stand, and he turns back for his office. He steps aside for you to enter first before closing the doors behind you both. Neuvilleite makes his way over to his desk, picking up a crystal jug full of chilled water and pouring it into a glass. “Here, have some. Take a seat over there. Are you hungry? Did you eat breakfast?”

Oh. I forgot to get myself a pastry at the bakery. You don’t want to bother him with getting anything for you, so you decline. “I’m not hungry, Neuvilleite. I had coffee. Thanks for the water.” You reach for the glass he holds out.

Once you take it, he slowly retracts his hand, still looking dubious, unconvinced. “Are you sure? You look like you’re about to faint.”

Annoyance pierces through you and you frown, before remembering yourself and straining to remain patient and assuring. *He’s only worried, don’t snap at him about it.* “Truly, Neuvilleite, I’m fine. Shall we get on with it?” He gives you one more long look before turning back for his desk, shuffling through some papers, taking a seat. “...Alright, then. In short, the article is all over Fontaine now, and I’m getting a lot of questions.”

“Journalists are going to pressure you for an interview even more now,” you remark, sipping your water. “And when I was downtown, people were casting me second looks. How are we supposed to lay low *now*?” He sighs. “Furina stormed in here this morning and demanded for me to use this to my advantage.” As if that isn’t already what he’s trying to do. He looks at you from beneath his brow, through his lashes, his head dipped over some papers. “The first event she’s assigned to us to attend is a tea party, which is next week. She says we’re to ‘promote the loving nature of our espousal’.”

You massage your forehead in a feeble attempt to ease the throbbing inside your brain that's steadily intensifying by the second. "I'm beginning to believe this is some beautifully entertaining joke to her." You stare at him through squinted, tired eyes. "Does she expect us to hug and kiss and act all schmaltzy in *public*? Before many Fontainian nobles?"

"...She didn't specify." From the way the Iudex tries to appear subtle and avoid your eyes, you conclude that Furina *did* specify such notions, and that you practically hit the nail on the head. *Poor guy. This must be so awkward for someone as reserved as him.* Considering his chaste, celibate track record, Neuville's cheeks and ears tend to dust red at even the mere mention of intimacy, even if it's something as minor as hand-holding. You find it endearing, and you're dying to tease him about it, but the present circumstances deem such a thing as terribly inappropriate. He's likely the most innocent man in the nation in that prospective area.

There's a brief silence before you sigh and stand, approaching the desk to refill your glass. "May I have some more?" "Of course, go ahead." Neuville dips his pen in the ink jar and continues to sign some documents in flowing, neat handwriting. "Would you like to go back to your chambers to rest? You did say you have a headache."

"Thank you, Neuville, but I have a few more worries to put to rest first." It's getting harder and harder to refrain from curling into a ball from the cramps. So you take a seat again, posture stiff. "Will you order the article to discontinue publishing? Should I stay in the Palais for the time being?" "No—there's no point in ordering The Steambird to cease distributing the papers, as it's already far and wide and everyone would know by now. And...well, yes, I believe you should remain here for a little while. People will mob you. To Fontaine, news of my marriage would be an enormous shock, so we must time the announcement right...which will be next week."

His terse expression tells you everything you need to know about how he feels about the 'timing'. Clearly, nothing is going according to his plan—a plan, you are sure, would've been much more thorough and logical than whatever Furina is now pushing upon you both.

You're still unsure of the Hydro Archon's intentions. She *did* say she wants Neuville to 'fall in love' and experience 'marital happiness', but such a thing with you is just unfeasible. You have a hard time seeing it happening—something Neuville himself likely agrees with, if he's ever even considered it before.

Silence falls once more, and you hold the glass in your hands instead of sipping at it. You quickly decide that you've bothered the Iudex for long enough now, and you stand. "Alright, well, that puts my mind at ease a great deal." A lie. "I'd best go on and rest. Catch up on some sleep."

"You do that." Neuville nods firmly in agreement. "Have a lovely rest of your day, [Name]."

You merely murmur a soft thanks and smile before turning to exit his office, heading off for Neuville's wing of the Palais. As you walk past the windows along the hall, you notice the rain pelting against the glass, streaming down the panes. *Strange. It was so sunny this morning.*

You've always liked the sound of rain battering against the roof and glass, so you hurry off for your room. It's so nice to listen to at night, and sleeping off your headache is exactly what you wish to do.

After requesting a hot water bottle from one of the maids assigned to your chambers, you enter your personal bathroom, strip from your clothes and into a bathrobe, getting ready for a shower. Despite it barely even being noon yet, you feel dead tired. If you want those circles under your eyes gone, you're going to have to sleep the entire day away.

"Miss, here is your hot water bottle." Once you've finished showering, the kindly maid, Anaïs, places the hot water bottle wrapped in a flannel on your bed. "Would you like me to wake you up for dinner?"

You mull over it for a second, before shaking your head. "No, it's alright." An unfamiliar item catches your eye in the corner, on a table nearby. It's a cylindrical box, pure white with no lettering on it. "What's that, Anaïs?"

She turns to face what you're pointing at. "Oh! That's something Monsieur Neuville had the chef keep and give to you." She smiles, curtsying. "He also told me not to tell you what it is until you open it. Rest well, my lady."

Before you can reply and ask any more questions, Anaïs has already exited your room, leaving you alone.

You approach the box, taking a seat upon the small sofa before the table, reaching for the box. You notice a plate, knife and small fork and letter resting beside it.

You pick up the letter, noting your name written in familiar flowing handwriting upon the front of the envelope, and you waste no time in opening it up, pulling out the cream-coloured paper inside.

[Name],

You didn't get a chance to try out the black forest cake I had prepared for you by the chef last night for dessert, due to the distressing interruption during our meal. It matters not, for I made sure it was refrigerated and kept preserved for your enjoyment later. I hope this cheers you up.

Sincerely,

Neuville.

Maybe it was your all-over-the-place hormones and your faulty emotions due to your period, but you found yourself shedding a few tears—not of sadness, no, but of delight and *relief*. It also proved as a convenient distraction from the tremble of your hands as you held the letter and the erratic hammering of your heart, heat flaring across your cheeks.

Needless to say, apart from feeling quite embarrassed at your school-girlish reaction to his courteous letter and gift, you enjoyed a generous slice of lovely black forest layer-cake that

day; your mood lifted, with only a giddy smile left in its place.

Chapter End Notes

the update is HERE!! I DID say on my tumblr that there'd be a triple update but...yeah I couldn't. sorry for a long wait and short chapter, but bro my brain is just not letting me write longer chapters ugh

IT'S 2024!! wow, I am so excited for this year in regards to the fics I will be uploading! I have so much in store (like that wrio fic I talked about on my tumblr) <3

anyways sorry for the cringey ending on this one, again, I just have not been in the zone this month 💔 some bad things happened literally a DAY into the year so yep.

tyasm for your patience! 🙏

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A week passes by in a blink, and the tea party is just around the corner. Your opinion of the Iudex increased greatly at that kind notion of his to send you that cake, and you felt strangely encouraged—and, for some reason, you weren't apprehensive of the upcoming tea party at all anymore.

Perhaps it's because Navia jovially announced how she would also be attending. Or maybe it's how you felt reassured with Neuvillette by your side. Or, even more possibly, it's the fact that Neuvillette had sent you a letter a few days ago saying it was time to begin your act in front of the Hydro Archon.

Some things had changed within the plan—alterations you and the Chief Justice yourselves had made. Instead of sticking to the original scheme of Wriothesley's, you both opted for something that would dash Furina's spirits even more.

Neuvillette reiterated Wriothesley's plan in his letter—you were, initially, to act way too over-the-top; to act utterly and stupidly in love with the Iudex, and annoy the hell out of Furina. You were also to appear overly-friendly—something that would fray the Hydro Archon's patience towards you, ultimately (and hopefully) ending in her insisting on your divorce with the Iudex and your expulsion from the Palais.

Now, things are different.

'When in Furina's presence, make sure to speak ill of me,' the letter had stated. 'Make it seem as if you have an exceptionally low opinion of me, and attempt to disillusion Furina into thinking we really aren't compatible after all. I believe I can leave the rest in your capable hands. This was not the method I ever wanted to resort to, but we both agree that we must end this debacle she's thrust upon us A.S.A.P.'

Well, that's simple to do, is what you thought once you had thrown the letter into the fire, but now, as you stand in front of not only Furina herself, but Champion Duelist Clorinde, maybe you and Neuvillette's plan was much easier said than done.

"It's lovely to see you again, Miss Clorinde," you greet, extending your hand to shake hers. She takes yours in a firm grip and gives a single shake before letting go. You find yourself feeling quite envious of Clorinde—she's beautiful; with a tall, shapely figure and an undeniable elegance about her. Her hands are small and graceful, and the message she effortlessly conveyed through the handshake was clear—she is no one to trifle with, and she does not doubt her own capabilities.

You admire that about her. However, her presence has become quite a setback in the executing of your plans. There's no way you'd be able to talk smack about Neuvillette *and* harshly discourage the Hydro Archon right in front of the musket-wielding, sword-slinging

Champion Duelist of Fontaine. You know that she'd march you off for detainment and interrogation immediately at your disrespect.

"Likewise," she voices the same single word she gave you when you first met at the ball. Clorinde kind of hides behind her hair, only her left violet eye visible and staring right at you with unabashed circumspection. "Congrats on your marriage to the Iudex."

Your brows shoot up. You didn't expect her to know. "I—thank you, Miss Clorinde." You're also surprised at how she actually acknowledged you—although it was about something you'd rather not be associated with, it's still the most you've ever heard her say—apart from calling Wriothesley an idiot back at the ball—and probably the most she's ever said to you.

"I thought I'd invite you both over for tea as you haven't met yet!" Furina claps her hands, oblivious to the fact that you both *did* meet at the ball—the one where this entire fiasco had started. Neither of you move to correct her, though—she's already babbling on about how much she'd like you both to be friends. "You both have such similar temperaments! Elusive, unreadable, mysterious..."

You internally wince at her words. They aren't words you'd use to describe yourself at all. They make you sound interesting—and you don't believe you are. At least, not as interesting as Clorinde comes off as.

Clorinde *does* seem elusive, unreadable and most certainly mysterious. She's almost brooding. And, well, frankly, you wouldn't mind becoming friends with her. She's cold and inscrutable, but does not rub off as unkind.

"At any rate, I think you two will get along." Maybe the side-glances you both give each other in unison at her words is a first sign of such, but you quickly brush it off. Clorinde doesn't appear to be too thrilled about being here. Neither are you.

"Well, then! As it's just us ladies today, shall we eat cake to our hearts' delight?" Furina, always the master at diffusing awkward atmospheres, claps her hands once more and swivels around to prance over to the nearby table. It's already all nicely prepared—an assortment of varying desserts laid out across display trays and small plates. It smells wonderful, but the sight strikes you with an unpleasant sense of familiarity—you're reminded of the stormy argument that blew out of proportion mere months ago now. A tinge of embarrassment pricks you at the memory of your, frankly, unruly behaviour from back then. However, what's done is done—and you're just glad Furina doesn't really seem to remember it.

"These look lovely, Lady Furina," you say, also trying to make the atmosphere a bit more amiable. "Is this the cake that only has 16 slices available for a day?" You had only a few bites of the cake back at the meeting, for your appetite was dashed. Today, you intend to enjoy it.

"Of course, it is! I wouldn't hold such an occasion if it *wasn't* available." She seems pleased with herself, humming jovially as she elegantly holds the teapot with her two small hands and pours the steaming liquid into her teacup. "Goodness, we have much to discuss today. Too bad Neuville couldn't make it. Miss Clorinde, will you attend the tea party Baroness Aillet is hosting?"

“Erm, I never received an invitation...” Clorinde occupies herself with pouring her own tea into her teacup. You have a feeling that she doesn’t really want to go. “And, well, I can’t show up uninvited...”

“Oh! No matter, I believe I have a spare invitation *somewhere*.” Furina picks up her purse and rummages through it. Sneaking a glance at Clorinde, you see her purse her lips slightly and sigh almost inaudibly through her nose. *Yeah. Clearly, she doesn’t wish to attend.* And fair enough. “Here we are! I think it would be wonderful to see you come along. You have many fans wishing to meet you, Clorinde.”

“...I see.” She accepts the small invitation and places it into a pocket somewhere. “Thank you for your generosity, Lady Furina. You needn’t have given your only plus-one invitation to me.”

Furina waves a dismissive hand. “Please, don’t worry about it. I’m sure the baroness would be thrilled to see you there. Now, [Name].” She links her hands together and leans forward, placing her chin atop her fingers. “How has it been with Neuvillette? Are you two enjoying married life?” *Ah, right*, you cast a subtle glance in Clorinde’s direction, whose expression seems interested, as she places a single sugar cube into her tea and stirs it gently. *Clorinde, nor anyone else, knows about the true nature of our marriage.* “It’s...going well. He sent me a cake the other day.”

“*Really?*” You instantly regret opening your big mouth the instant Furina slams the table with both palms, rattling the cutlery, already halfway out of her seat. She half-smiles, half-gapes at you, face practically glowing with joy at the news. *It’s not that big of a deal.* Yet she’s acting as if you just announced a pregnancy—a pregnancy that will never happen. “Oh, isn’t he a darling? I *knew* he’d treat you well.”

You have to physically restrain from cringing. “Uh...yes, I suppose so.” *I guess the best I can do for now is to not act very enthused at the mention of him, if I’m going to put up any kind of act at all.* “It’s not like he talks to me much.”

“What?” Furina seems to have forgotten all about the secondary presence in the room—Clorinde—who now has to listen in on a—frankly—personal conversation (or gossip session) about your husband. A conversation she likely wouldn’t want to hear, and one you don’t really want her hearing.

Furina begins to rant. “What do you *mean*, ‘it’s not like he talks to me much’?! You’re married! I told you two to enjoy each other—in *all* ways!” Your face flares with heat, her words the poker to stoke the flames. You’re about to protest and implore her to correct her wording, but she persists. “That *knucklehead*! He can’t ever get into that thick skull of his that finding love and having a wife is a *good* thing. I want to be an aunt—!”

“Lady Furina, would you *please*,” your tone is nowhere as severe as you’d like it—in fact, the embarrassment of her crude words has left your voice croaking like a dehydrated frog’s. You notice Clorinde’s brows are sky-high, her cheeks also tinged pink, and that augments your humiliation even further. “That is no matter to discuss over tea or before guests. Neuvillette most certainly wouldn’t appreciate this either.”

“Oh—m-my apologies, I got a little carried away there...haha...” *You think?* She awkwardly scratches her cheek. “I just...well, Neuville’s never had someone by his side, and—”

“I understand.” You reach for the handle of your teacup, bringing it to your lips, blowing on the hot liquid inside softly. “However, such matters are very private between a husband and a wife.”

Clorinde speaks up, something you’re surprised at. “I...never thought Neuville would marry, much less for love.” Her words perturb you inexplicably. She turns her piercing indigo stare to you. “To think it’s happened in my lifetime. But, I will say this, Madame...” *Madame* is still something you’re not used to being called; and you find yourself tensing in anticipation for her to continue. “When I watched you two dance that night, I, along with likely all of the attendees, saw sparks fly.” She ahems, tapping the teaspoon she was using to stir her tea lightly against the rim of her cup awkwardly. “Please excuse my...*tacky* wording, but I do agree that you’re a good match.”

On a normal day—or, if you felt normal at all about this entire blunder anymore—you would’ve adamantly disagreed and denied such a thing. But, for some reason, you find yourself falling silent in thought. *Could she be right?* You have only known the Iudex for a few months, but the whole time, he has treated you with nothing but respect and care. *I mean, I won’t deny that I feel something too...but what about him?*

You don’t want to get your hopes up, and you still want this marriage to end as soon as it can. So what if there’s ‘chemistry’? It wouldn’t work, anyway—you, along with every other citizen in Fontaine, know that he has no human lifespan. He’d outlive you, and things would end in shambles if you were to stick to one another.

“Well, I suppose it’s because we *do* get along.” You take a sip of tea. “He’s a considerate man.”

“I should hope so,” Furina huffs, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair. “At any rate, this tea party we will be attending will be good for you to ease into this nation’s high society. Believe me when I say the nobles are *quite* insufferable.” You only just manage to catch Clorinde’s soft grunt of agreement as Furina rolls her eyes. “And as you’re a commoner, they may not take too kindly to the announcement of your marriage to the Iudex. Do you know how many marriage proposals he gets on the weekly from desperate fathers of airheaded daughters?” She shakes her head in incredulity even at the thought. “All I’m saying is to prepare yourself. You’ll have a few angry and affronted nobles eager to pick a bone with you at any event you attend with Neuville.”

You’d surmised as much already, but you’re grateful for her warnings in advance. “I will take heed of that, thank you, Lady Furina.” You’ve dealt with snotty nobles plenty of times before, especially when you’ve attended the occasional ball with Navia and had to bear with their disdainful looks at a commoner being present for the evening. You really don’t get how they always think they’re superior to everyone else just because they have money and a title—a title that, in the end, is just as empty as their fake niceties.

“But I’m sure you’ll be fine.” You’re uncertain whether to be complimented or concerned at how much faith she appears to have in you. “You seem to know how to deflect all kinds of

irking remarks made by any and everyone.”

“...Yes.” It’s not hard to tell slimy men to push off—although, they usually target the more attractive young women. Another perk to being rather plain. And now, with the Chief Justice of Fontaine at your side, you won’t be bothered again.

“Now, I’d like to know what the next two events that you’ve prepared for Neuville and I are.” You suppose it wouldn’t really matter if Clorinde listens in, as she isn’t privy to the true context of the matter. And she doesn’t seem bothered either—Clorinde appears to be someone who minds her own business, and does not pry.

“Ah! Did he not tell you?” He might’ve, but you can’t recall much. You *did* pass out on your bed after eating the cake he sent you and the meeting. At any rate, it would pay to have confirmation from her. “Well, your first little date is the tea party, the next is a banquet I was able to snag some invites to, and finally—just as a nice little reminder of the past of how you both met—your last event will be a ball!”

“Oh...alright.” You select a macaron just to occupy your mouth with something other than speaking, processing her words. She seems excited—elated, even—while your stomach continues to swerve and roll about in apprehension. *A ball, of all things. We’ll probably be the centre of attention! How on earth will I manage it?*

“You look a bit green, [Name], dear.” *And now she’s calling me an endearing name?* It really is getting a bit overwhelming. *Oh, if only Neuville was here to handle her. Why won’t Clorinde talk more to occupy her for me?* You ahem, while she continues. “Here, have some ice-cold water. The sort Neuville would like.”

You glance at her from beneath your brow, still coughing softly into your fist. “Aha, thank you, Lady Furina. Uh, will you be attending the ball?”

“Sadly, no,” she sighs defeatedly, as if truly disappointed. “I really wish I could. I would be able to die happy seeing Neuville finally dance with someone—his *wife*, no less. However, just knowing he will do such is enough for me. Duty calls! Someone’s got to keep this country running.”

“...Of course.” You nod, finishing off the last of your tea. *Doesn’t look like I’ll be able to leave any time soon.* “That’s a shame. What about you, Miss Clorinde?”

“Well...I will see what I can do. Wriothesley will probably drag me along to it, anyway.” She swirls the liquid gently around in her cup as she speaks. “Am I also invited to the banquet, Lady Furina?”

Her tone gives away how much she’s hoping Furina will say no—but, alas, the Hydro Archon perks up and beams, humming in delight as she finishes off her slice of cake before responding. “Of course! You simply *must* attend, Clorinde.” She then smiles at you, and you’ve come to understand that as never a good sign. “I will be in attendance for the tea party *and* banquet. Isn’t it exciting? Oh, they will all be so honoured to be graced with my presence.”

Hm, yes, they would have to. You cut a piece off of your slice of cake with your fork, allowing yourself a bit. It really is a wonderful cake—not quite as good as the black forest one Neuville sent you, baked by the Palais' own chef. "Are you sure you can't make it to the ball?" You're only being polite. *Please tell me yes!* You're certain even more trouble would ensue if she were to be present.

"Yes. It's so unfortunate." *Speak for yourself!* Neuville would likely be pleased with the news, if he doesn't already know. "Oh well! You will all have a wonderful time, I'm sure."

"Absolutely." However, nothing is guaranteed for smooth sailing. And while you're on this rocky sea of marriage and nobles and meddling fellow women, the boat very well may be engulfed by its dark waves, dragging you and Neuville down with it.

"[Name]~!"

You immediately perk up at the familiar voice—there Navia is, waving merrily in your direction, beaming. You quickly approach her, greeting her with a happy smile of your own. "Hey, Navia. I'm so glad you're here."

"So am I." She pulls you in for a brief hug, soft and sisterly. "Are you nervous? Don't be. You've got me and Neuville. Say, where is he?" "Over there, somewhere." He had gone to greet some other acquaintances you didn't know. Many other nobles and wealthy commoners are milling around, gathering into small groups to chat with one another. Until the official announcement of Neuville's marriage, he had said that it'd likely be best to remain apart from one another. You agreed, and now you are here, arm-in-arm with your best friend, sauntering over to greet the host. "I think he's talking with Duke Wriothsesley."

"The Duke's here?" Navia sounds surprised—and you were too, when you'd seen his dark mop of hair and broad shoulders making their way through the crowd. And you'd seen the young women quickly have him surrounded, fawning over his attractive figure and devilishly handsome face. The look of clear regret for ever coming was painfully apparent on his features.

"Yes, and he's been cornered by the women," you stifle a laugh, turning your head to try and spot him. You quickly do, his tall frame only just visible above the sea of girls battering their lashes and fanning themselves with their hands and fans alike. He looks wildly uncomfortable, saying something to try and make them give him personal space, but they just keep placing their manicured hands on the bulk of his forearm seductively.

Navia also tries not to giggle, the back of her hand against her mouth in an attempt to silence it. "No wonder he's never seen out. The stuffy air of the Fortress protects him from his salivating fangirls."

You have to bite back your laughter as you both arrive before the host of the tea party, Baroness Aillet. You both curtsy, expressing your greetings and gratitude. "*Bonjour*, Baroness Aillet. It's such an honour to have been invited to this wonderful gathering."

She turns, the middle-aged woman's face breaking into a welcoming smile. "Oh, please, girls, it's only my pleasure to have such lovely guests today. Thank *you* for attending. Please have a seat at any table anywhere."

The two of you curtsy once more in thanks, murmuring polite words of appreciation before heading off, leaving the noblewoman to greet other guests. It's quite the crowd today, the Baron's estate gardens almost too small for forty guests. You spot the familiar sunglasses-clad right-hand men of Navia's, Silver and Melus, wandering about the crowd, watchful eyes observing everyone and Navia. You smile at them in greeting when you catch their eye, of which they return.

"Ah, there's Neuvillette. Oh my, is that Lady Furina?" Your attention is drawn to wherever Navia gestures towards, catching sight of Neuvillette's familiar broad back and his resplendent silver hair, Furina's smaller figure beside him. She's animatedly talking to him about something, the Iudex staring down at her with a stiff posture, clearly not pleased about whatever she's saying. She smiles; his lips are pursed in displeasure. As you both make your way over to them, you faintly hear him sigh and say, 'Fine'.

"*Bonjour*, Lady Furina," Navia greets the Hydro Archon first. "*C'est un plaisir de vous voir.*"

"Oh—uh, *bien sûr*, it's a pleasure to meet the Demoiselle of the Spinda du Rosula once more!" Furina seems a bit awkward—perhaps due to the embarrassment of being called out on her hogwash by Navia herself when Lyney and Lynette were put on trial. "So good to have you here. The more the merrier! Haha..."

Navia smiles like the sun before greeting Neuvillette politely, dipping into a curtsy. "*Et bonjour à vous*, Monsieur Neuvillette. *Comment allez-vous ?*"

"Ah, *je vais bien, merci*, Demoiselle Navia." He bows his head in greeting. "How has the Spina du Rosula been?"

"Business is booming once more, thankfully." Despite that, Navia still looks a bit tired. You make a mental note to pester her about whether she's been resting enough. "Now, I haven't heard too much about how your—ahem, *marriage*—" she lowers her voice considerably, as to not alert other, eavesdropping guests close by. It's clear everyone is shocked that the reclusive Chief Justice is in attendance for yet another event today. "With my dearest friend [Name] has been."

"Aha, well, things have been...smooth." He shoots a glance your way, amethyst hues clearly imploring you to help him out here. "We get along well."

"Yes, we do." You fidget with your purse's strap. "Although, Neuvillette's awfully busy, so we don't see each other much."

"Well, that's to be expected, no?" Navia already knows the reality of the situation, but there are appearances to keep up—especially when the time for the announcement arrives. "You must make the most of the time you have then."

“Well said, Navia!” Furina giggles in delight, turning to you and Neuville. “Run along, now, you two. You have an announcement to make, yes?”

“Ahem...I...suppose so.” Neuville gives you a subtle, wary glance, and you, with a resigned sigh, step forward to take his arm. “Let’s get this over and done with,” you tip your head up to murmur in his ear softly. He inclines his head down towards you and nods. “I’ll go up and begin the speech; you wait in the crowd until I call you, yes?”

“Alright,” you quietly reply, and he quickly departs, making his way toward the Baroness. You watch as he says a few words to her, to which he goes ‘oh!’ and nods, picking up her skirts to rush over for the front of the garden—or, really, the marble deck overlooking the place. She holds up her wine glass and taps the side of it three times, silence soon falling across the yard as everyone’s attention is drawn towards the front. “Everyone, if I may have your attention, please—His Honour, the Chief Justice of Fontaine, has graced us with his presence today, and has an announcement to make. Please welcome him up.”

Polite clapping ensues as Neuville strides over to the Baroness, thanking her and bowing his head in acknowledgement to the crowd. “Thank you, everyone. I apologise for disturbing your conversations with your companions. However, the matter you are all the first of the commonplace to be privy to is of the utmost importance.” You observe him from the sidelines, somewhere he can see you clearly and gesture for you at the right time. You note how stiff and almost nervous he seems—he’s used to that high, exalted chair in the Epiclese, where he is commanding and in his element—however, here, in front of a tiny crowd compared to that which gathers in the courthouse on trial days, he is far from his comfort zone, addressing something miles away from that of hearings, and instead is about to announce something that will likely make everyone faint from shock.

You sense a presence come to a stop a respectful distance from you, beside you. You turn to look up at Duke Wriothesley, who bobs his head in greeting to you. “Madame.”

“Your Grace,” you politely greet back, your voice a murmur. You both turn to refocus on the front where Neuville is speaking.

“This news will be...shocking for you, I’m sure. However, I will say that it is *good* news. You see, recently, headlines have been going crazy over the fact that I danced with a woman at a ball months ago. There was even a photo captured of the moment. A moment I...” He trails off, considering his words for a second. “A moment that changed my life—one that has been, frankly, long and arduous. And when people say that the topic of this matter is a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ experience, I find that I agree. I have lived centuries, dutifully fulfilling my role as Chief Justice, and to think I would have the opportunity to experience the miracle of *love*...” Neuville pauses once more, allowing the crowd to whisper and gasp about themselves. *He’s putting up an impeccable act.* “...Is something that is foreign, but never unwelcome, to me.

“And then, only about a week—maybe two—ago, another photo was taken of a woman and I alone on a street. She and I...were shocked at the headline. *When did they get this photo of us?* was our question.” With every word of his, your heart rate escalates—and it positively *jumps* at the look that crosses his face as he comes to stop in his words once more. He glances down at the ground, a soft smile gracing his mouth. One you, and anyone else with

eyes, would immediately take for the unmistakable look of love. *He's...an amazing actor.* “But it has proven advantageous. It has brought me here, today, to now—to introduce you all to the woman who has turned my mundane, routinely life into one of sunlight. So, my dearest wife, will you please join my side up here?”

Now is the time. Neuville turns his piercing mauve hues towards you, his hand outstretched towards you. With an anxious swallow and deep breath in, you stride forward, head held high. Again, the crowd ripples with gasps and whispers and murmurs, every eye on you. You gather your skirts into one hand as you walk, the other extended, falling into his gloved one; coming to a stop at his side before everyone.

Your blood rushes in your ears, your hand clasped in his; Neuville's hand is warm and large and engulfing yours fully. *He's my anchor.* He faces everyone once more. “Please welcome my wife, Madame [Name]. She is a wonderful woman—strong, level headed, and, most of all...” He pauses, turning to you, lifting your hand, pressing a soft kiss to the back of it, eyes pinned to yours—before leaning forward and pressing one to your cheek. It's tender, unimposing and *adoring*. You catch yourself in time before you can reel back and exclaim in surprise, wits scattered. He whispers a barely-audible *I'm sorry* in your ear before straightening again, noting the way the onlookers' jaws have long clattered to the ground in shock. “She is the one to remain by my side. We have been married for only a few months, but they have been the most joyous few months of my life.”

You take that as your cue to speak. “Th-Thank you all—and thank you, Neuville.” *Ugh, this is so hard! I'm about to faint from that kiss!* You mask your trepidation and lean your head against Neuville's bicep, smiling up at him. “This man is all any woman could possibly ask for in a husband.”

And, suddenly, the entire crowd bursts into thunderous applause, whistles and cheers reverberating all across the yard. Taken aback, you glance up at Neuville, who merely smiles down at you. *Right, the act's not over until we leave.* “Shall we, my dear?” “Oh, yes.” You take his arm and you both step back down onto the grass of the garden, nodding in greeting and offering thanks to everyone around who wishes you well. *Well, I think this is as close to a wedding reception we'll ever get.* As it sure feels like one. *I wonder what their reactions will be when our divorce is announced next year?*

Wriothesley comes along and pats the Iudex on the back, while Navia hugs you. *What the heck. This is all way over the top.* It's pretty much the last straw for you when Furina shows up, squealing in delight. “My goodness! The chemistry between you two up there was *out of this world!* Wow!” She claps her hands, beaming. “I knew you were both *such* a good idea!”

Left with no choice but to humour her, you and Neuville do your best to address everyone who comes up to speak with you both, expressing their congratulations and well-wishes. You actually overhear someone say that an old woman fainted in shock at the announcement. It's all so overwhelming. Now, you are the centre of attention—something you wish to go away—and you've been forced to adjust in such a short time. *When do we leave?*

You weren't sure whether to be glad or have your spirits even more trampled upon when Navia came rushing up to you, blue eyes blown wide and her expression one of unadulterated

distress. Maybe you should've been happy for the distraction—if the news wasn't so frightful.

“[Name].” She pulls you to the side, away from everyone, hands shaking. “This is bad.”

“Wh-What's wrong?” It's rare to see the composed Navia so ruffled. “Calm down. Are you okay?” “I just got news back about something related to you...that I've been investigating.” Alarm bells are blaring, but you force yourself to remain silent and allow her to continue.

“[Name]...” Her voice falls to a whisper. “André's dead.”

And the whole world caves in.

Chapter End Notes

any guesses as to who 'André' may be? 🤔

sorry for yet another shorter chapter 💔 this was fun to write tho ahaha

— un moment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Do you mean to say that *all these years...*” After a moment of silence of you trying not to collapse or throw up or yell, you finally manage out your next words in an icily calm, quiet voice. “You have been secretly investigating his whereabouts without my knowing?”

“Look, I know how this would sound...” A desperate gleam enters Navia’s eyes—a gleam you recognise to convey that someone has just discovered how much they’ve *messed up*. The panic in her eyes is practically overflowing. “But I’ve been doing it to gather evidence and get you the justice you deserve. I’ve been tracking him! The Spina di Rosula is a private investigation branch, and this is what I do! And as your best friend—”

“Did I not tell you, *very* explicitly, that I want no one I know to have anything to do with him?” The trauma has now been triggered, and you’re finding it hard not to curl up into a ball from the memories flooding in. *Great. I’m going to have another panic attack if this keeps up.* “When he escaped, I knew that it would end as a cold case. You told me that you would respect my wishes, Navia.” Tears well up, but you fight them back. “And why did you choose to tell me *now*, here? At a *tea* party when the marriage I never wanted was just announced?!”

The entire garden goes silent, every head turned your way. You blink, your bones freezing to ice, wide eyes surveying the yard. *Oh, archons. What have I done?*

“As you were, everyone.” Maybe he should be wearing a hero’s cape from the sheer relief you feel upon hearing Neuville’s smooth, calm voice filter throughout the area. He nods to the crowd as he makes his way over to you both. His eyes hold no anger or shock at your outburst, only concern. “Is everything alright?”

“We’re *fine*—”

“[Name], you should tell him.”

“What? No!” Your fists, balled at your sides, tremble with panic and fear. “He doesn’t need to know. Neuville, it’s fine, really—everything’s *fine*.”

“...Let’s take this inside.” His hand is now at your elbow, grip gentle, unobtrusive—but you flinch away before your wits can tell you otherwise. His eyes widen a fraction, hurt flashing within them—before understanding softens the blow. “[Name]. Don’t you think it’d be best to head indoors and discuss this there?”

Even though the guests obeyed the Chief Justice and went back to their conversations, people are still staring; the seemingly fanatic wife of the Iudex and how she just denied her husband’s touch now the topic of their conversation. Sick to your stomach, you inhale a deep breath and nod. “Yes. Let’s.”

Taking the sheer embarrassment in stride, the three of you make your way up the steps, the Baroness leading you to a small room for you to speak privately in, the woman's kind face lined with concern. You catch the questioning glances from Furina and Wriothesley before the door closes behind you.

"[Name], the only way that I can be of any help is to tell me whatever is troubling you," are the first gentle words Neuvillette speaks you with once the three of you are alone. His eyes are of that soft amaranth hue again; so *understanding*, and it frustrates you. "You're under no obligation to do so, however, but I really do want to help you."

"Neuvillette, this isn't something someone, such as yourself, who is already burdened with such difficulties which far outweigh mine in terms of struggle—"

"Oh, cut the rot, [Name]." Navia flicks your forehead, and you softly yelp. She only ever does that to you when she believes you're being particularly stupid. "Stop downplaying and invalidating your own hurt. If you don't tell him, then I will."

You gave Neuvillette a brief glance, seeing his lilac eyes trained on you unwaveringly, waiting for you to continue. "Okay, fine. I was engaged to a man five years ago until he tried to kill me. That's the short version and I am not—" You whip your head around to shoot a narrow-eyed, warning glare at Navia. "—Going into detail at present."

"That's all I need to know." It truly is, if the quick wash of rage drenching him at your clipped words says anything. Rage for whoever the coward was for even *daring* to harm even a single hair on your head. However, Neuvillette keeps his expression calm and posture as relaxed as he can. He doesn't want to worry or—even worse—scare you. His right fist clenches into a tight ball at his side, the material of his glove only barely keeping his nails from piercing the skin of his palm. The pain does not ease or bother him. "Were you two discussing this man's whereabouts?"

"Yes, I just reported to [Name] that the man is dead," Navia promptly replies before you can butt in. "It's a true shame we weren't able to bring him to court and have him locked away forever."

I can think of a few more things to inflict upon him, other than a sentence. Things that involve a lot of bruises and broken bones. Neuvillette keeps his dark thoughts to himself. "Very much so. But, why are you distressed over such news, [Name]?" Don't tell me you still love him.

"Because I specifically told the ones who helped me rehabilitate to not bother chasing after him." Neuvillette observes how shadowed your expression becomes, eyes at your feet. "You'd never catch him. He had too many connections. And it'd put everyone in needless danger." If you both were closer, maybe he'd have been able to embrace and comfort you, like how his hand is itching to do right now. The haunted look in your eyes mirrors murky skies on a stormy day—like how the clouds are drawing into one another and looming overhead at present. *She says five years. She says she rehabilitated. It seems more like five years of continual, lonely torture.*

“And although I won’t deny I’m glad he’s finally gone, I don’t appreciate Navia here going back on her word—and, not only that, but leaving me in the dark until the worst possible moment. Didn’t the thought of waiting until later when I *wouldn’t* be under such stress enter your head?”

“After today, I won’t be able to see you for the next week,” Navia shoots back. “And by then, it’ll be far too late! No time like the present, and I think it’s something you need to know *immediately*.”

“Agreed.” Neuvillette barely keeps himself from wincing at the scathing look you turn your head to give him. Your mouth is open and ready to pour forth protests, but his hand on your shoulder silences you. “If you’re worried about public opinion, don’t be. Causing a fuss could in fact prove advantageous to this marriage...ending.” He doesn’t know why he suddenly hesitated at the word ‘ending’.

You don’t appear to notice. “Well, if you put it that way...but! The factor still stands, Navia.” Maybe your frayed nerves are making you overreact, but you’re feeling pretty affronted right now. Besides, it’s *your* past and *your* emotions. And they are valid. “I’d rather *not* embarrass myself in front of forty-or-so people and the Iudex.”

“You’ve nothing to be ashamed about,” Neuvillette says, voice soft. “It would be a shock to anyone. Would you like to head back to the Palais?”

You mull his suggestion over for a moment, chewing on your lower lip. “Well...what do you think would be best?”

“I think you need to rest and think for a bit,” he replies. “Process the news you just received. Navia?”

“I agree.” She nods, crossing her arms. “Don’t bother with Furina and her antics today. Go on home and chill.”

You heave a sigh and turn to Neuvillette. “Let’s get out of here, then.”

“I must go, also.” Navia turns to glance at the nearby grandfather clock, the time reading 4:11PM. “André’s death isn’t going to investigate itself, is it? See you!” She rushes out at the look in your face, the door slamming shut behind her, the two of you left alone.

With the main source of energy gone, fatigue embraces you. “Let me take your arm, Neuvillette. I’m about to fall asleep.”

He chuckles, and you feel the vibration against you as he allows you to lean against him. You flood with heat at the sensation, and you don’t know why. Instead of taking your arm, he wraps his right one around you, holding you close. “Shall I carry you bridal-style out of this estate, just to give everyone a show?”

Neuvillette’s cheek is pressed against the left side of your head, warm breath fanning lightly over your ear and sending delightful shivers down your spine. Your own breath hitches; you turn your head to stare up at him. Intense amethyst-hued eyes peer into yours playfully,

amusement dancing along his irises. You huff out a laugh, pulse pounding at his proximity, pressing your cheek against his shoulder impishly. “Why not? Maybe it’ll make Furina faint.”

He arched a brow, lips curling up into a small, amused smirk. “Praying on the Hydro Archon’s downfall, now, are we?”

You pat his chest with mock-sympathy. “Such tragic events in the wake of our *love* are able to be overcome as long as we stick together, yes?”

He smiles widely enough at your joke that you’re flashed with a blinding glimpse of his pearly whites. “I’m glad to hear that you still know how to smile, even after everything that happened and has happened.” Then, completely unexpectedly, he stoops closer and brings his free arm up under your knees, hoisting you up and thus carrying you bridal-style, like he said he would. “Now. Shall we?”

You squeak in surprise, flailing your arms around a little, before finally taking hold of Neuville’s neck. “Goodness! You surprised me.” His head is inclined down toward you, a little too close for comfort, and your fingers accidentally get tangled in his moon-hued locks. You tug involuntarily, and he lets out a groan—the sound low and deep and silky. “Oh—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pull on your hair.” His grunts sent flashes of heat straight to your core, and you squirm.

His brow relaxes from the furrow it was in and he gives you a small, reassuring grin. “It’s alright. I just have a sensitive scalp, is all. I won’t drop you, so you’ve no reason to hold on.”

“Aren’t I heavy?” You *have* put on some weight from all the luxurious food you’ve been served for the past few weeks—if the even tighter fit of your corset and rolling tummy fat is anything to go by. You’ve been having to suck in your stomach a lot more than usual. Although you don’t believe Neuville is the sort of man who would be bothered by such a sight, you don’t really want him to be privy to yet another rooted insecurity of yours and have the obviously muscular man struggle under your weight. However, at present, his posture is completely relaxed—he doesn’t seem to be having difficulty with holding you in his arms at all. *He must have a lot more muscle under those thick robes than I thought.* Which makes you question—*where does he get the time to stay in shape?*

“Not at all.” He turns towards the door, and you reach to open it for him. “Now, how shall we do this? We must make sure *everyone* has a nice, big shock.”

“Let’s say I fainted in your arms, and you’ve got to carry me off back to my *room*.” You smile deviously. “That’ll *really* get the rumour mill going. I can see it—‘does this mean the Iudex will have an heir?’” You put the back of your hand to your forehead and lean back, as if fainting most theatrically. “Is she expecting?” Oh, but then people will *want* that.” Maybe you’re taking this a wee bit too far.

Neuville laughs lightheartedly again. “Wonderful ideas. Maybe it’ll get Furina off our backs for a while—if we make it appear our relationship is coming along swimmingly.” He nudges the door open with his foot and steps out. “Alright, then, dear wife—that’s your cue.”

Without another word, you go limp in his arms, slumping against his shoulder, eyes shut. His hold tightens but remains gentle, and you can just feel him shift into character. *For such an awkward man, he most certainly can act.*

You hear the mingling guests' chatter die down slightly at the emergence of the Chief Justice from the main house, and a set of heels clack over to you both. "My word! What in the Seven happened to the Madame, Monsieur?"

You try not to smirk in amusement at the genuine worry in the Baroness' tone. You feel Neuville draw in a deep breath and exhale it in a fretful sigh. "I sincerely apologise, but my wife and I depart prematurely. You see, she's fallen ill at some awfully distressing news regarding her family."

How velvety is the holy Iudex's tongue when he lies. Abstaining from laughter is getting harder and harder. "Therefore, it is my duty as her husband to escort her *back to her chambers to rest.*"

Lovely choice of words. You internally applaud his apt emphasising, also. *This'll get Furina going.*

"O-Oh! Why, of course. Have a...pleasant trip, Monsieur." The uncertainty and clear embarrassment in Baroness Aillet's voice gives clear indication that Neuville's innuendo was successfully communicated.

"Thank you. Have a lovely rest of your afternoon, everyone." With that, you feel Neuville turn and begin to walk back through the main hall of the house and out the front foyer.

"There's no one else around now, [Name]," he whispers in your ear, and you almost jump with how close he is. Your eyes fly open and you lift your head from his shoulder. "Truly? Alright. You can put me down now—"

"Shh, one moment—there's the butler." *Goodness, he's keeping this act up until the very last minute.* "My apologies for interrupting you," his words are a rushed whisper.

So you fall back onto his shoulder, seemingly unconscious, as Neuville and the butler greet each briefly before continuing on past. The sun shines into your eyes—*strange, it was so cloudy before*—and you lift your hand to shade yourself from its glare. "Since we're out early, won't we have to hail a carriage from somewhere?"

"I had the coachman stay," he replies, making no move to put you down. "Let's just say I had a premonition."

"*Well*, aren't *you* the schemer, huh?" You tease, smacking him lightly on his chest. Your hand meets solid, robed muscle, and Neuville does not flinch. He just keeps his serpentine-slitted amaranth eyes ahead, a faint smile gracing his features. "You *planned* for us to leave early."

"I become...*emboldened* in your presence, *ma chérie.*" His eyes flit down to meet yours intently. "Even if Miss Navia didn't give me such an adequate opportunity to bring you aside

and convince you to get out of that suffocating place, I would've just gone with plan B."

"You've been spending too much time with Wriothesley," you huff out a small laugh, shaking your head in amusement. "You're becoming slier by the day."

"If it means coming to the rescue of my dearest wife, then I suppose the pure Chief Justice has to get a little dirt under his nails." You both finally come to a stop before the carriage, and he gently puts you down. His hold on you does not loosen until your feet are flat on the ground—and even then, he retains a firm but kindly hold on your hand. He opens the carriage door himself, having told the coachman not to worry himself with it, and he lets you up inside first. You slide onto a seat, while he swiftly takes the one opposite you. "Of course, nothing criminally related."

"I'm sure." You're still reeling from his small pet name of '*ma chérie*' and how the man just admitted he's not afraid to go to such lengths for you. *When did our relationship progress to such a stage? I don't recall this being a clause in the contract...apart from mutually agreeing towards a more casual, friendly relationship.* You're unsure whether this recent... *development* within your dynamic is exactly acceptable. *What if it grows into something more? What if I fall—or, have I already...?*

If so, things are only bound to crumble and shatter down around your ears. *I can't risk it. I've dived and argued with myself so many times—this...really can't go on.*

But your current status—how well you both get along, how much you're beginning to like the buzz of electricity shooting through you at only a mere brush of shoulders from him, and how *safe* and *comfortable* you feel around the man...it's all teetering on the brink; it's entering hazardous territory. One wrong move, and it all comes tumbling down.

That dark, slithering sensation of *fear* sets into your veins once more, poisoning your blood with murky pulses of dread and foreboding. However, you find your own natural reaction of shutting down and everyone out to such a feeling delayed—he *looks so chipper, and the sun is shining.* *How could I ruin the moment with my own selfish worries? I would only be burdening the man more.*

"...I'm sure Furina is quite torn between being outraged and delighted at the turn of events," he's saying, snapping you from your shadowed reverie. His soft lilac hues sparkle like a violet-shaded aurora borealis. "Maybe it could be dawning on her that her plans have too many loopholes we keep slipping through. That should stunt her for a bit, no?"

"She selected our final event to be a *ball*. It's already nearing the end of the year. What if the event is put back so far it'll go over the contract deadline—oh!"

Abruptly, the carriage jolts over something awfully bumpy on the road. You both heard the coachman let out an 'oops! Sorry about that, Monsieur *et* Madame!' before your present predicament dawns on you.

The jostle was so violent it flung you forward, sending you face-first into the warm, expansive chest of the Iudex. Your cry of surprise was lost in the front of his dress shirt, your

frame pressed fully up against him—and, you finally realise with horror—you're now practically straddling him!

“My goodness, [Name], are you alright?” Two large, warm hands come to rest on your upper arms, gently, slowly easing you away from him. You slump down from your position enough so that you sit on his knee, his own legs now spread. You're quite frazzled—hair frizzy, eyes wide and cheeks flushed beet red; your dress' left strap loosened and hanging off your shoulder. It's likely giving him quite a nice view of your collarbones and cleavage.

“I-I...” You quickly adjust your dress strap and make sure your chest is fully covered, never having been so humiliated in all your life. “My apologies—I didn't—”

A featherlight brush of long, gentle fingers ghosts over your neck—right over your scar. You flinch roughly back, almost toppling over again, if not for your grip on his shoulder; eyes wide and gawking into his own. His are not focused on yours—instead, they are trained right on the scar, his brows upturned into a perturbed frown. Neuville's hand is unmoving in midair, frozen into that caressing motion. Finally, it moves again, coming up to your cheek to brush some hair behind your ear, touch cruelly tender. “Did *he* do that to you?”

You barely hear him over the blood rushing in your ears. *What is he...?* His whisper is almost inaudible, and his tone holds an understanding you've never heard before. And it only just manages to conceal a masked, but unmistakable, cadence of stoked ire.

“I...yes,” you finally reply, voice just as low. “It's an old scar.” *I should've worn a choker. Now look at what's happened! The last person I wanted to see it now has! Damn that coachman for going at such a speed over a bump!*

“It looks like it was caused by a rope.” *Of course, he's likely seen lots of murder scenes, so he'd know.* You avert your gaze, swallowing. But his hand cradles your cheek again and he turns your head back to him. You feel physically pierced at the compassionate look in his eyes. “...What happened?”

Should I tell him? It's not like he *really* needs to know. Another six months and you likely won't cross paths again. But the man has a knack at making you fold when confronted with those soft eyes of his. Full of innocence, full of tenderness, full of goodwill.

“I'll tell you...later. Back at the Palais.” You trust him. You trust him with your wounds. The warmth in his eyes, voice and touch makes you feel secure. That tells you why you haven't pushed away his hand cupping your cheek, thumb caressing the swell of it comfortingly. That tells you why you *can't*.

“[Name], forgive me for encroaching on your space.” His other arm suddenly circles itself around your waist, pulling you closer. You're thus chest-to-chest, hands clutching his strong shoulders. You can't breathe. “But I think you need this.”

With that, he leans forward, wraps his arms around you, and guides your face into his neck. His hand cradles the back of your head, and you cling to him, hands balling his robe's material on his back into tight fists.

You bury your face into his neck like a babe would to its mother. He holds you, and you cry.

Chapter End Notes

dun dun DUUUUN guess who's dead 🤔 guess who ISN'T coming back to make your wonderful future happiness with neuvillette a nightmare?? THAT'S RIGHT, I killed off your toxic ex 💕

BUT next chapter will be the LONG AWAITED flashback chapter!! all will be revealed, you and neuv will understand each other more, and the story will continue to progress swimmingly <3

and I remember seeing a comment on one of the chapters about how this reminds them of Pride & Prejudice...AND YES!! it's partly inspired by it, especially the amazing scene where Darcy helps Elizabeth up onto the carriage and he flexes his hand as he walks away...ARRRGH I love that bit so much 🙏

and as for the final quarter of the chapter...I couldn't help myself. like. this man gives the best hugs THAT is my headcanon. it starts raining when others share their pain with him. he's such a sweetheart, so empathetic, you can see why im head over heels for him 💔

ANYWAYYYYS I am, again, SO SORRY FOR THE WAIT 🙏 work and life def has favourites, but I am not one of them. so sorry y'all 3

— presque

Chapter Summary

TW !! extreme cringe ahead, you have been warned. proceed with caution 🧡 (spare yourself while you still can)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You didn't intend to fall asleep, but that was the heaviest and most tiring crying session you've had in a very long time. So, after calming down, you allowed yourself to indulge in Neuville's warmth and crisp, masculine scent before you could think better of it. He whispered something in your ear; you felt him unpin your hair, running his long fingers through it soothingly. You felt vaguely perturbed by how *familiar* and *natural* the notion was before sleep fully fogged your thoughts.

Neuville doesn't understand this quick thumping in his ribcage. His heart pummels against the bone, as if it has grown fists of its own and is presently battering against him to be set free. Maybe it's because of that ticklish sensation of soft hair brushing against his cheek and nape whenever the woman in his arms shifts slightly and breathes evenly. Her tresses cascade down and out around her shoulders, fringe obscuring her features from his eyes. Perhaps that's a good thing. He doesn't know what he'd do if he catches a glimpse of the tear stains and melted mascara streaks smudged across her cheeks. It fills him with an inexplicable pinch of hurt.

The shadows in her eyes draw near like the clouds congregating for imminent rain. However, if he were to stand out within the downpour now, he suspects not even the cool caress of the deluge would soothe his inward unease.

"I'll tell you...later. Back at the Palais," is what she said, and Neuville felt his pulse leap and quicken when she leaned into his touch. *Does she trust me?* Warning and elation swept through his veins like a hurtling undercurrent, cool and raging. It unnerved him.

He doesn't know what to expect from the story you will eventually confide in him, but he feels apprehensive. Throughout the duration of the ride back to the Palais Mermonia, his wife sleeping peacefully in his arms, questions rattle him with the force of a wave smacking against the hull of a ship. *What on earth could have happened to haunt you so for the past five years?* He wants to know, as he believes it would be a vital factor towards understanding your character further, but the ache in your eyes made his own emotions dip. *Is this too soon? Do I even have the right? We shall part ways in just over half a year...what will I do with the information?*

He worries it would be much too personal of a story to share with a man who is your husband on paper only, not in heart. That thought abruptly pierces him, and he unconsciously clutches you closer.

Neuvillette also doesn't know how he would be of any help. He's not good with emotions, but he's not desensitised to pain. It's something he experiences more often than not—especially whenever a particularly wrenching trial is overseen. The Chief Justice, so insulated within that exalted chair and allegedly impassive towards the hearing's recipients, now faced with one woman's past, leaving him helpless. A powerful, expressionless man who has heard and judged it all, only to experience the first shock of misgiving in a very long time.

The Iudex Neuvillette does not get *close* with people. He does not lend his shoulder to *anyone*. He does not hold a broken person in his arms so *gently*, as if afraid of fracturing their soul even more. There are no exceptions; *everyone* is kept at arms' length. Not a living person in this land knows his true name. And that will never change.

His amethyst eyes flicker down, observing the rise and fall of your shoulders as you sleep. Incertitude—a feeling he's become much too familiar with these recent months—courses through his blood once more. It's like his heart is pumping it out into every vein, consuming each fibre of his being. He's beginning to *reconsider*. For a steely man such as him, that is unheard of.

This current position is perfect for him to lean his cheek against the crown of your head, but he doesn't dare. He's already imposed on your personal space enough by embracing you out of the blue. In fact, he was fully expecting you to jump back and slap him, and he thinks he would've deserved it, but you didn't. You melted into him and wrapped your own arms around him, sniffing into his nape.

Neuvillette never even knew he was so touch-starved until recently. Being near you and carrying you in his arms has given him a rush of happiness he's utterly unfamiliar with. Which is why, although the circumstances with your mental state at present aren't the most ideal, he feels strangely content.

You're warm, and your figure fits against him almost perfectly. He's uncaring of the makeup stains sure to be smearing the expensive silk of his coat. All Neuvillette's presently worried about is getting you back to your chambers for you to rest for the remainder of the day.

Her story can wait until another time. He feels the carriage begin to slow and draw to a halt. Gently, Neuvillette slings his free arm under your knees, his other holding tightly to your shoulders. He makes sure his movements and grip is soft, so as to not wake you.

"We're here, Monsie—oh." The coachman opens the door and stops short at the sight of the Madame nestled cosily within the Chief Justice's arms. With the single look, the man is silenced by Neuvillette as he carefully but nimbly steps down from the vehicle. "No need to accompany me. I will go inside by myself."

"Uh, yes, sir," the man nods a bit dazedly and hops back up on the driver's seat. "Good day to you, Monsieur."

With an acknowledging nod, Neuville turns and makes his way up the steps for the entrance. He, of course, did not take the front entrance—the private entry of the Palais is around the side of the building, a little ways away from the stables and garden. It would not do to have the public bear witness to the orderly Iudex going into the Palais Mermonia with an unknown woman within his arms. Besides, he'd only just announced his marriage to her barely an hour ago.

It would take two days, tops, for the news to make its way completely around the nation, and a week or so for the entirety of Teyvat to thus know also. They must spare as much privacy as they possibly can before it is, once and for all, stripped of them completely.

As if his mailbox isn't already utterly overflowing with nagging requests from newspaper companies just begging him for even a short word on some kind of matter. Demands for interviews made up most of the letters. He's, frankly, amazed The Steambird hasn't given up on him, even after all these years. *Who will they harass next? My wife?*

It's likely, and it will soon prove difficult to fully implement the necessary amount of guards and protection around her. It's a vital clause of the contract—

Ah, yes, the *contract*. Neuville's mood suddenly sours at the thought of it. For the first time in, probably, centuries, he feels indignant at the sheer amount and weight of his duties. And he feels awfully disinclined to Furina even more, now. *It's not like it ever would've happened, but it would have been much more preferable if I was able to enter a relationship with someone under normal circumstances.*

Neuville is a dreamer. And he frequently dreams pipe ones. With his position and duty bestowed upon him by Foçalors, such a reverie of 'love' is only a pointless, unavailing one.

Hundreds of years ago, Furina once said to him, *'You're more likely to commit a crime and be exiled to the Fortress for it than ever fall in love'*.

In Liyue, it is of the highest offence to break a contract before it is fulfilled. Although not as powerful of an ideological influence, the same applies to pretty much every other nation on the continent. But, would it be sin for one as undefiled as the great Iudex of Fontaine to wish to take back his word?

The Chief Justice never goes back on his word. His word is his life, his word is law in the courthouse. To break it is to be partial. Iudex Neuville is not a partial man.

He can't afford to be. His jaw clenches, and he takes care to keep his gaze ahead. The sun streaming in through the windows so jovially aggravates him. The clouds will gather soon.

Neuville arrives at your door. He gently puts you down, making sure your feet are flat on the ground, his arm steadying you against him, reaching to turn the handle. The sun spills into your room also, the air warm, the dust flurrying about as illuminated by the sun's beams. His clothes are too tight, robe too heavy. He lifts you again and sets you down upon the mattress, fluffing your pillow beneath your head and ridding you of your shoes.

He draws the curtain shut over the window where the sun shines over the bed, into your face. Neuvillette pops a few buttons on his dress shirt beneath his overcoat, perspiration beading on his upper lip and the back of his neck. He really does not like hot sunshine and stuffy rooms. Sweating makes his scalp itch.

“Oh—Monsieur?” He turns, startled, dropping his hand from the curtain, facing the door. There is your personal maid Anaïs, staring at him with a surprised expression. Then she spots the Madame. “Ah, you’ve bought her in. How long has she been asleep?”

“For about three quarters of an hour. The tea party stressed her out quite a bit.” All Neuvillette wants to do right now is doze on the seafloor, but alas, that is disorderly at present. He can’t remember the last time he had a swim, actually. “Tell her there’s no need to join me for dinner. I’ll be having it in my office.”

“Uh, alright, Monsieur.” Anaïs makes her way to your side, checking on your state. She pauses, silent, and Neuvillette involuntarily tenses. “...Monsieur, has Madame been crying? Her makeup is smeared and her eyes are puffy.”

“She...has been under much pressure, as of late.” Neuvillette lowers his gaze to the coffee table to his left, lips thinned. He doesn’t want to lie—but if it’s for your sake, then he has little say. “It does no one any good to bottle it up, and she broke down. Please...check on her from time to time. She needs the support.”

“I’ll gladly do as you say, Monsieur—but, if I may be so bold...why don’t you?” Neuvillette snaps his gaze to the maid, who stands there with her hands clasped humbly and eyes earnest. “Forgive me for my rudeness, but wouldn’t she be more inclined and trusting to you after seeing her in such a vulnerable state? She speaks fondly of you, Monsieur. I don’t believe she’d be offended.”

“I...” He doesn’t know what to say. Would you like him to impose even further into your territory? Vie for your trust? Covet your touch? Neuvillette can’t fathom these feelings. He thought this would never go anywhere. He believed Furina would never succeed with pushing him to love someone. Is this love? Is there a difference between attachment, affection, *longing*? If so, *what is it*?

I need a drink. Of water. Of nice, ice-cold, crisp Liyuean water. Yes. That will clear his head, rid him of these disruptive thoughts.

“I will keep your words in mind,” he says, advancing forward to the door. “However, it is up to her. Good day.”

The door clicks shut. Anaïs goes to prepare the Madame her bathing wear. You open your eyes, and stare at the ceiling.

Anaïs told you that Neuvillette would be ‘preoccupied’ for the evening, and thus unable to dine with you. You feigned disappointment, already being aware of the truth, and forced down the meal provided for you. It was delicious, but the conversation you overheard prevented you from fully enjoying it.

Anaïs bids you goodnight, bowing politely as she draws the door shut. It's 9PM, and the sun has long set. There is no moon nor stars out tonight, only a dreary blanket of clouds inking over the sky. You sit upon the window seat, hugging a cushion, head leaned against the sill, staring out.

She needs the support. You don't think you were in your right mind when you said you'd tell him everything. Now, you're considering backing out. As you've always done. You backed out of tracking the man down, you backed out of your friends' lives, you backed out of trusting another man ever again...

But you didn't back out of agreeing to this marriage. How strange. Well, you *were* coerced into assenting, but there was no other outlet. Neuville is your friend.

Friend.

Such an apt, convenient, *comfortable* description of a relationship between mutuals. A concise, neatly drawn line; *you stay on your side, I'll stay on mine. Don't let it blur.*

The contract is the line here, and it's blurring. You're getting too relaxed. Proximity between you both is coming too fast, too casually, too *naturally*. Distance is closing. Gazes are lingering. Danger is impending.

It's fine. Two more events, two more times to act—to pretend. To put on an opera Furina wants to make history. Let her puppet the strings two more times. Live out the remaining short time afterwards peacefully, distantly, and when the time comes to annul this whole ordeal, do so without hesitation.

Yes. This is what we've wanted. This is just a passing, fleeting moment of your life. It will fade soon.

The cushion smacks against your ensuite door with a *thwack!* Your chest heaves, fists clenched. *It's too much! Haven't you learned your lesson? Are you dying for another round of agony from your foolish decisions—from letting your heart rule your head?*

Damn it all. *Damn it all to hell!* You need air. You so desperately need *air*.

You envy Neuville. He has emotions, but he doesn't understand them. He can't *recognise* them. You can. And it's *aggravating*. You want to be rid of these 'feelings'. So useless, never worth your while.

Archons, could this get anymore cliché? You were told love isn't anything like the romance books. And it isn't. At least, that's what you thought. André didn't leave you breathless. He didn't leave you overwhelmed. No, he left you for dead.

And what's the difference here? Everyone knows Neuville's some kind of 'higher being'. He'll outlive you. This will never work.

You wrench your door open and march down the halls. The candles in the sconces are long out. The servants have retired for the night. Good. You wish to be undisturbed.

You know your way to the garden. You pray Neuville's still 'preoccupied' and not wandering out and about in them, like he says he does. It isn't raining, but it's cloudy with the approaching gloom of it. Whatever. Maybe a cold will knock some sense into you.

You storm out the screened door, stepping out onto the grass barefooted. You just hope there aren't any prickles.

The air is humid, the breeze with a slight chill. You're in nothing but a nightgown. You breathe in the scent of rain—its earthy, musky scent. The clouds aren't as thick as you thought—you can see the silvery glow of the moon glinting through the clouds. *His hair.*

"Ugh!" You gnaw on your bottom lip and stride forward, making your way for the hedges. *Is there a path down to the shore? I'm hot, I could use a swim.*

There has to be. Neuville likes the sea too much to not have one leading from the gardens down to it. *Yes, a dip is just what I need. It'll distract me for a bit.*

You manoeuvre your way through the garden, past the bubbling fountain and under through a trellis. The cloying scent of Rainbow Roses brushes past you. You don't have the layout of the garden memorised at all, so you wander about aimlessly for a bit before finally coming across a cobblestone path descending in a slope.

A small, waist-high metal gate guards it. You take a moment to see if this really does lead down to the shore, but it's too dark to see anything clearly, even with your eyes long accustomed to the darkness. Your nightgown's skirt is rather tight around your calves, so you gather it up mid-thigh and step over the gate.

The cobblestone is cold beneath your bare feet. The path is rather steep, and it curves a lot. But, sure enough, you breathe a sigh of relief when the grassy bank fades into sand. You step onto the beach, inhaling the crisp scent of the salty bodies of water before you.

Fontainian waters are very deep with abrupt drops some metres out, and you don't have a Vision. But you can swim, as pretty much every Fontainian citizen can, and you saunter forward, not even thinking of peeling off your nightgown and toe at the water.

Ooh, it's chilly. You let your skin get accustomed to the water's temperature before walking out and submerging yourself fully. It's nice once you are used to it, and you duck beneath the soft, rippling waves.

Fontainian waters are always calm. It's called an 'ocean' or a 'sea' by the region's citizens, but they're really just expansive rivers. And there aren't many dangerous sea creatures. So you swim out to the drop, and dive down deep.

It's pitch dark, and you quickly reemerge for oxygen. *A Vision would be nice...* They also help you see underwater at night, according to Navia.

You're unfit. The added weight from the luxurious food helps you lose your breath quicker than you'd like. Besides, you haven't swum in a while. You're amazed you're still capable of keeping yourself from drowning.

You return to the surface once more, treading the water, wiping your soaked hair from your eyes. You're most certainly not in swimming attire; your nightgown feeling heavy around your shoulders despite it being light and cool for the summer weather. You're hoping you'll have dried enough on your walk back.

It was wise to have a swim, you surmise. Your head is clearer now, your wild thoughts calmed, your antsy nerves soothed. The water is so pleasantly cool.

You dive under once more and attempt to do butterfly for the shore. You last two strokes before resurfacing, panting. *Goodness, I am so out of shape.*

So you opt to slowly half-breaststroke, half-doggy paddle with your head above the water for the bank, where the water recedes quickly enough to stand. Wiping your hair from your eyes once more, you step onto dry sand. Your feet immediately become smothered with it, much to your annoyance.

Your nightgown practically becomes a second skin, pasted to your body uncomfortably. If anyone were to see you, it would be quite an embarrassing sight—

“[Name]? Is that you?”

You jump and whirl around with a squeak, hand upon your heart in fright. “Archons! You scared me. Who are you?”

“...It's me, Neuville. What in the world are you doing out here at this time of night?”

Oh, just wonderful. I had to come across the very person I didn't want to think about! You observe his tall, powerful frame, and soon discover something quite shocking. Is his...hair out? Like, untied? Wait, where's his shirt?

Your eyes do not lie. There's light enough that you can make out his silvery hair, flowing out behind him, the ends no longer tied by that ribbon he always wears. And he's...topless.

Your gaze meets carved, toned flesh; abdominal muscles prominent against his torso and his chest is wider than you thought. His arms, too, are large—biceps burly and strong.

His skin glistens with the unmistakable shine of water, and his hair is dripping wet, also. Draped over his left forearm is some kind of clothing, and you can only guess it to be his coat or something.

You force your eyes away. It's hard not to ogle him. *Well, he was always attractive.* “I...could ask the same of you, Monsieur.”

“I was swimming.”

“So was I.”

Silence. You can only hope it's dark enough so that he can't see *you*. You aren't wearing a bra, and the nightgown has always been quite flimsy. You never thought much of it, as when you wore it most, it was when you lived alone, without fear of others seeing you.

“...Why were you swim—*oh*.”

Something in the tone of his voice makes you glance back at him, and Neuville has a hand over his face. The scarce moonlight catches the gleam of his ring. Embarrassment almost knocks you over. *He's seen me*. “I—uh, I didn't bring a towel...that was...thoughtless of me, my apologies.”

You bring your arms up over your chest, hoping your lower half isn't *too* exposed. It's not like you aren't wearing any underwear. Granny pants are comfortable and cover almost everything, but you're still about to explode from humiliation.

Neuville is in quite the predicament. Usually, having sharp, inhumanly good eyesight is a useful trait he is pleased to have, but it's proving awfully difficult at present. Once he laid eyes on the half-exposed figure of the woman before him—his *wife*, no less—something he doesn't want to think about thrummed to life inside. And the *very* reason he went for a swim was to get her off his mind for a little bit. Now, here she is, right before him, hot with embarrassment and modestly covering her top half, sending him haywire.

“I suppose this is what you were ‘preoccupied’ with this evening, Neuville?” Her voice, usually rather monotonous, yet soft, has a clear edge to it this time. He can't face her. He is a *gentleman*. It would be most unbecoming of him if he pinned her to the sand and ravished her. *What the hell is wrong with me?* His entire face is burning. He can't really find the words to respond.

“I *was* busy with work, [Name],” he eventually manages to answer, voice cracking a tiny bit. *I never read about this kind of feeling before*. He finally gathers enough of his wits to hand her his coat. “Here, take this and cover yourself. You'll catch a nasty cold.”

“What about y—” then you remember that he ‘doesn't catch colds’. So you accept it, the material dry and warm, wrapping it around yourself until you are finally decent. “Alright, you may look now.”

A muscle in his jaw pulses, and he faces you once more. “Please don't do something so foolish again. It's terribly dangerous for a woman to be out here, where Treasure Hoarders and Fatui roam, without any means of protecting yourself—”

“I get it, Neuville,” you sigh, not in the mood to be nagged. You look up at him, and falter. His gaze, usually so calm and warm and kind, is now glinting with something *else*. Neuville stares right at you, with an intensity you haven't ever seen before, and you feel even more exposed. Like the coat is not enough.

Your mind scrambles for a logical explanation. *He's probably just angry! Yeah, that's it...* you squirm, perturbed at how you don't feel threatened, *at all*. The atmosphere's crackling with tension, and you're frozen in place. “But, um, th-thank you for your concern...”

He doesn't reply, and your pulse quickens a bit more. You can't feel the chill of the wind anymore. The moon's out fully now. Light spills over the man, and you swear his eyes are glowing. And right now, if there's a person who fits the definition of ‘ethereal’, this man would be the embodiment of it.

“I, uh, didn’t know you swam.” Making small talk is the only way you can think of to ease the rather fervid air. And you tend to say stupid things when flustered. He’s still giving you a look that’s sending your imagination wild. “Isn’t it so refreshing...?”

“Very much so.” His voice is silkier than usual. And lower? You’re unsure what to make of it. *Ugh, this is so cringe.* Nothing is going to plan; he’s making it really difficult right now to not jump him. Irrational thoughts of ‘*it’s what a husband and wife does!*’ and ‘*there won’t be any strings attached, it’ll just be a little bit of fun*’ are barraging you relentlessly, and you’re a breath away from giving in.

No. I can’t do that to him. I can’t do that to me. It’d worsen everything. You’re already emotionally attached, and the pull of attraction between you both is getting a bit much now.

Your own thoughts sound like something right out of the very books that influenced Furina to push this entire ordeal onto you two. They sound childish, like you’re a lovesick teenager again, thinking your entire life’s purpose was ‘finding the *one*’ and falling in ‘love’. *Cringe.*

Wait, hold on—when did we get so close to each other? Before, you were both quite a few metres apart, but now—*somehow*—the distance closed, and you can feel the heat emanating off of the man before you. You feel well and truly dwarfed right now. Neuville is much more intimidating shirtless, and you can’t fathom why.

“What was on your mind?” His voice is much quieter, almost a whisper. A ghost of a touch brushes your arm. You didn’t put your arms through the coat’s sleeves; the coat is hanging over you by your shoulders. You shiver.

“A...lot of things.” Like you’re going to tell him the truth. You’re having to crane your neck to look up at him, and his head is dipped down to see you clearly. You feel very vulnerable under his stare, so you redirect yours to the water. You’re blushing like a schoolgirl. “I couldn’t sleep. And uh—” You brush a bit of damp hair behind your ear, fidgeting. “I’d like to apologise...for my earlier deportment. It was awfully...impolite to cry on you like that.”

“I was the one who intruded upon your personal space.” It doesn’t seem to occur much to him that he’s doing such a thing again—but then again, so are you. You have no intention of moving. He skims his knuckles across your cheek tenderly, his touch barely-there, and you almost close your eyes in pleasure. “I hope you’ll find it within yourself to forgive me.”

You don’t realise you’ve leaned into his touch until he tucks a stray tendril of hair you missed behind your ear. “What’s there to forgive? You did what was best, no?”

“Likely a spur-of-the-moment thing,” he softly replies, and his hand moves to your jaw, fingers tilting your chin up so you have to look at him. His eyes rove over your face, soft lilac reduced to a tenebrous indigo. “I hate to see you cry.”

“How grand of you,” you say playfully, brushing a hand against his wrist. “I haven’t allowed a man to hold me like that in a very long time, much less let him witness me bawl like a baby.” His lips are looking awfully enticing. You subconsciously bite down upon your own bottom one only lightly, but his eyes flick downwards at the motion.

“What an honour, truly.” His thumb *accidentally* grazes across your lower lip. “To think you *slept* like a baby in my arms. I carried you to your room.”

“Oh, I know.” All traces of your previous bout of resentment have seemingly disappeared, and now it’s replaced with desire. “That’s what you said to the entire procession of the tea party, no? That I need to go *back to my chambers to rest*.”

“Mhm.” His hum comes as a rumble from his chest. The sound elicits an unexpected reaction in your core. You tense. “That’s what we want the public to think, yes? That the new star couple of Fontaine has plenty of *libido*?”

“*Goodness*, Neuville,” you breathe a laugh, and you absentmindedly place a hand on his torso for balance. His abdomen flexes attractively in a flinch. “Be careful, or we’ll begin to get pressured for a child. Furina already said she wants a niece.”

“So did Navia.” It’s your turn to falter in surprise, eyes wide. He continues before you can speak. “She said she wants a goddaughter, right?”

“I...you heard?” *How humiliating!* “I-I thought...”

“I have sharp ears,” he responds coolly, as if you were remarking on the weather.

“Remember, *I’m* going to be your future children’s godmother. I want a goddaughter, by the way’.” The exact quotation of Navia’s words from *weeks* ago has you reeling. *How on earth did he manage to remember?* His eyes shimmer with amusement. “It’s not like she whispered to you *quietly*.”

Well, he’s not wrong. You glance at his ears, seeing their peculiar, pointed shape. You notice he isn’t wearing those fancy feathered clips he’s always got on. His fringe is also swept back over his head, a few selenic strands of hair hanging down over his brow. “Hm. I really *do* wonder what you truly are, *mon beau*. Your ears aren’t human-shaped, you can hear whispers between friends, your eyes look like...”

You look into his mauve hues closely, studying them. He stares straight back with a clear-eyed, intent gaze that makes heat rush straight to your cheeks. “Well...”

“*Well?*” He prods, silvery brows lifting in expectation. “Tell me, *ma chérie*, what do they remind you of?”

You feel like you’re really getting tested—no, it feels like he is *hinting* at something he wants you to guess correctly. Your own eyes narrow at him, thinking. “I don’t know. They’re kind of reptilian...wait, are you a Vishap?”

You’ve seen a Vishap’s pupil shape before in illustrated books, and Neuville’s look awfully similar. It’s like his human form is limited to his ear shape and pupil shape—oh, and his unnaturally coloured, long hair.

Neuville grins a little. “Close. I’m afraid it’s unlikely you will guess it.”

“What, do you want me to?” You tilt your head up at him. “I don’t think it’d be very wise if I guessed some huge secret of yours and we end this contract with me knowing.” A flash of realisation shines in his eyes. You give him a rather humourless smile. “You might have to send a hitman after me to make sure I *really* take it to my grave.”

His mouth parts in shock. “I’d never! How could you joke like that?”

It’s your turn to reach up and brush some of his silvery hair behind an ear. He jolts a little in surprise. *He’s not used to being touched, hm? But he’s not resisting...* In fact, Neuvillette relaxes under your touch almost instantaneously. You feel a swell of pride and fondness. “I know you wouldn’t. But, still, some things are best kept to ourselves.”

“You’re always so rational, aren’t you?” You feel a hand of his capture the dip of your waist and pull you flush against his chest. *Woah! Since when was the Chief Justice so bold??* This is the *third* time today he’s abolished all personal space between the both of you. You find yourself on the tips of your toes, one hand gripping his firm forearm and the other is splayed across his abdomen, feeling each and every ridge and ebb of his carved torso. *Maybe all those novels Furina’s been reading to him are actually getting through to him.* You aren’t disliking this.

“W-Well, we must be logical about such matters, yes?” His arm circles around to grip the small of your back and hold you against him, helping you balance on your toes properly. In fact, he’s practically lifting you, and you’re both so close your breaths mingle. One push up from you or one dip down from him and your mouths would meet.

It’s so tempting... But what would the repercussions be? A ripple could escalate into a tidal wave, and it would haul you deep beneath the water, never to breathe or see the sky again.

“I suppose...” Neuvillette’s free hand cups your cheek, thumb brushing over your cheekbone, just under your eye. His lashes flutter down, and at this point, you’re sure his eyes are glowing. You can see that iridescent amethyst glow even through his eyelashes. His full lips are parted, his breaths somewhat short, as if waiting for something. “Even when—”

“Oh, *my*, isn’t this *such* a romantic scene, Aleksei?”

And just like that, the rough, accent-heavy voice breaks the spell that bound you both with a shatter. You both flinch apart, whipping your heads around to the source of the voice. There, standing on the grass bank some metres away, stand two Fatui agents—one Pyroslinger Bracer and a mountainous Electrohammer Vanguard. ‘Aleksei’, the vanguard, sneers in response to his shorter comrade’s deriding comment. “Like something right out of one of those spewy romance novels my sister loves.”

Neuvillette’s hold tightens on you, protectively pulling you in against him, arms taut with tension. He glares straight at the two malicious men. “Stay near, [Name].” His whisper is almost a hiss. “Give me a moment.”

“To do *what*?” You hiss back, but the Pyroslinger’s nasally voice is ringing out again. “Are you two on your honeymoon or something? How sweet.” The way the man flexes his gun in his hands and its intensifying orange conveys his true intentions nicely. *They’re not letting us*

go alive. “We thought we’d join in on the fun. What do you think? You have quite a tasteful jacket on your shoulders there, *printsessa*.” You recoil into Neuvilleite at the unsolicited pet name the creep gives you. His hold on you tightens that much more at the sound of it, also. “You two must be a newly-wedded, *wealthycouple*. Surely you’ve got some good Mora on you both. Hand it over without hassle and we’ll let you go, alright?”

“Wait—you, Rapunzel.” The Vanguard speaks up and gestures rudely to Neuvilleite. “You look kind of familiar. Where’ve we seen you from?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Neuvilleite’s voice is steady, no hint of fear or *anything* in his tone. “You two are wasting your time. We’ve no belongings on us at present.”

“Aw, so you were just taking a nice little romantic stroll on the beach at night?” The Pyroslinger’s mocking tone *really*grates on your nerves. *Dammit, if I had a Vision...* You don’t know how either of you are going to get out of this predicament. The Fatui agents are before the path back up to the Palais, and then there’s the water behind you. *Surely Neuvilleite has a plan?*

You squeeze Neuvilleite’s arm in a silent plea. He rubs your shoulder gently with his thumb to show he understands. “We wish to be left alone. Please leave before things can escalate.”

“Like you can do anything, long-locks. You’re both defenceless. If we have to, we’ll kill you both. Although, I wouldn’t mind having some fun with your missus here...”

“I would advise you...” A chill skitters down your spine at how icy Neuvilleite’s tone suddenly becomes. It’s as cold as the skin of a frozen corpse. *“To move along, if you don’t wish for your throats to be torn out within the next minute.”*

You notice the men falter a little at his words and tone. You glance up, taking in his set, clenched jaw and eyes. They’re like glaciers.

“Ha...haha, you don’t scare me, old coot.” The Pyroslinger’s voice carries an almost undetectable tremor. He lifts the rifle in his hands, pointing it straight at Neuvilleite. “Looks like you’ve left me no choice. Want to give your beloved wife a final goodbye kiss?”

Where do these guys get the balls? You aren’t scared. You’re just amazed at their bravery. Or stupidity? A wise person did once say that ignorance makes a fool courageous.

“Neuvilleite, what do you have in mind?” You softly whisper, turning your face into his chest. “They’re between us and the path up to the Palais. And you don’t have any weapons on you.”

“It’s alright.” His voice loses a touch of its iciness. “I have a plan.”

You’ve heard of his display of strength and power in the courthouse during the 11th Fatui Harbinger, Tartaglia’s, trial. Apparently, it was so quick everyone almost missed it, but he knocked the man out in one fell swoop. So, you’re not very doubtful of his combat capabilities. You’re probably the concern here—you only know basic self-defence, but that’s

useless against two other men much larger and more skilled than you that wield a long-range weapon and a gigantic hammer. You'd only get in the way.

"What are you two muttering about?" The Vanguard takes a menacing step forward, bracing his hammer. "We hope you both have got your wills written out."

These guys have been reading too many action stories. Dumb and dumber, for sure. You almost roll your eyes.

Neuvillette doesn't answer them—instead, he whispers to you once more. "I'm going to pick you up and run into the water. How long can you hold your breath for?"

"Uh...are you planning on swimming all the way over to the other side?" You won't have the strength. That's a *longswim*. It's at least a mile across. "...I don't know, Neuvillette. That's quite the distance."

He gives your shoulder a comforting squeeze. "That's okay. We'll work it out." You're impressed with how calm he is right now. Any other person would probably grovel and beg for their lives, especially if they were cornered by two Fatui. He's acting as if it's just another Tuesday.

He sighs softly. "I'd beat them up, if I had my cane and catalyst." You glance up in surprise. You'd never even thought to ask if he could wield a weapon, since you never saw a Vision on him. But, then again, he isn't human.

"Aren't you both a fearless pair?" The Pyroslinger doesn't sound so easygoing anymore. "We told you to shut it. We're losing our patie—*hey!*"

Only the sound of a splash answers him; Neuvillette had moved so fast with you in his hold that you barely blinked.

"*Mmph!*" You choke on the water, hand upon your mouth, eyes squeezed shut. You hadn't even gotten a chance to draw in a deep, readying breath before Neuvillette jumped with you into the water.

"It's okay." You manage to blink your eyes open, the salt stinging at them, meeting the rather blurry pale face of Neuvillette. "Hold your breath for as long as you can. I'm a fast swimmer; we'll be far away from them soon."

He doesn't wait for you to nod in acknowledgement—Neuvillette has his left arm circled around your waist, clutching you to him firmly, and he takes a powerful push forward through the water. You're beginning to panic a bit—oxygen is running out quickly and you're beginning to squirm for air. Looking back, you notice puffs of vapour and black bullets of cooled Pyro in the water; the Pyroslinger must've tried to shoot at you both, but the water obstructed their path.

Neuvillette notices your grave need for air, and pushes for the surface. You break from his hold and rush for it, face breaking above the waves.

You gasp as you meet fresh air, gulping in greedy mouthfuls of oxygen. Blinking rapidly to adjust your sight and clear your eyes of the water, you glance over your shoulder and back to the shore. Neuvillette had swum halfway across, with you in his arms, in just thirty seconds.

The two Fatui agents, from what you can see, appear to have given up; shaking their heads in anger and heading off down the beach, away from you both.

A soft splash beside you has you turning back around. Neuvillette is sweeping back some hair from his face, eyes closed, skin glistening. It's the most attractive thing you've ever seen.

"Are you alright?" He quickly closes the distance between you and draws you in, helping you float above the surface without growing too tired. You're still gathering yourself, a bit dazed. You gladly take hold of his shoulders and regain your composure.

"Y-Yeah, I'm okay." You brush some wet hair from your face. "A warning would've been nice, Neuvillette."

"I'm sorry, the man had already raised the gun. He was aiming at you." His tone has a cold edge to it. "You did well." You turn your head and see that he's watching the agents stroll away, their two figures mere specks in the distance now. "Let's wait until they're fully around the bend."

He's a nice source of warmth against the chilled wind and rather frosty water. It has to be about midnight now, with the moon shining brightly overhead, the clouds completely gone, bathing the water and you both in silvery light. Neuvillette looks stunning. You find yourself rather envious of his fairly otherworldly looks.

"You're shivering," he softly says into your ear, and his free hand brushes down over your hair. Neuvillette then clicks his tongue. "The coat's sopping. You'll catch a chill at this rate. Let's head on back. Ready?"

You make sure you draw in a good, deep breath before nodding, and down you both go. Neuvillette's hold is like iron, sure and steady. Again, it takes barely a minute before he's swum all the way back to the shore, emerging from the water so fluidly, with you practically glued to his side, as if he is a being of Hydro itself.

"Here." In a flash, you're up and in his arms, being carried bridal style for the nth time today, taken completely by surprise. *Goodness, he's so unpredictable!* You flail for a hold, taking purchase of his neck. "You're cold. Hopefully my body heat will warm you up faster."

"Aren't you freezing as well, Neuvillette?" Despite the droplets of cool water trailing down his skin, he's warm. Quite toasty, in fact. He's not shivering, either, but you still worry. "I know you've said you don't catch colds, but..."

"Trust me, I'm fine." He smiles appreciatively down at you. "I'm worried sick about you, at the moment, however. We must get you inside and dry."

He's heading quite quickly up the path. The late-spring, nightly breeze does have a bite to it. "I won't get si—*achoo!*"

As if on cue, a sneeze racks you. *Wonderful. I think this was a very bad idea.* Embarrassed, you peek up at Neuvillette, who glances down with an arched brow. “You were saying?”

“...I won’t get sick,” you finish in a mutter. You’re already feeling the first of the incoming cold chilling your bones. *Yes, it was unwise to come out here in the first place.* The close proximity and what *almost* happened before the Fatui agents showed up still has your head spinning.

The look that was in his eyes will likely forever be ingrained into your memory. And you probably won’t forget the wash of heat you felt at the sight—not to mention his touch. It was like he was restraining himself.

You stare at your hands. You’re a woman, he’s a man. And you’re both married—so it’s not like such feelings are *wrong*.

But.

This relationship is *contractual*. To cross that line is to throw the clauses—ones you both took into such consideration—into the wind. It would also mean *giving in*, and Furina would be proven right.

But is that so bad? You frown at the thought. If you were to yield to the flesh, strings would become attached, and the repercussions would end you. Such are the very things you’ve both been trying adamantly to avoid.

He’s better off finding a more beautiful woman next time. You’ve tried so hard to move on from the cruel words your ex-fiancé threw at you, but they still became rooted insecurities. It’s pointless worrying over such things, but it becomes an unavoidable, unbeatable hurdle in the road towards healing. And having someone—like the man carrying you right now—brush your cheek so reverently, does not help ease your fear. It only confuses you.

You’ve been so lost in thought that you don’t even notice you’ve both arrived at the door until Neuvillette speaks up. “Here we are. Are you alright? You’ve been so quiet.”

See? When he speaks to me so sincerely, it sends me absolutely insane. The man always leaves you nonplussed. He eases you down to the ground, expression drawn with concern. You rush to answer. “Oh, I’m okay. Just...thinking.”

“...It’s been a long day. I understand.” *Yes. It has.* Way too many bemusing things have happened in barely twenty-four hours. You both enter the Palais, heading down the hallway. It’s dark, and the moonlight’s spilling into here, too. Neuvillette squeezes your shoulder. “Have courage. We’ll get through it.”

You place your own hand atop his, patting it gratefully. You’ve now both arrived outside of your bedroom door. You both stop before it, kind of just staring at each other. Before you can think about it, you push up into your toes and place a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you—for everything, today.” His shocked expression makes you squirm in discomfit. *What the hell did I just do?* You really haven’t been in your right mind as of late.

But he soon recovers—and doesn't seem offended at all. With his back to the windows, the moonlight spilling in, the Chief Justice is outlined in a lucent halo of silver, the sight utterly bewitching. It's like something right out of a fairy tale.

"It was the least I could do." He wants to kiss you. *Gods*, he wants to. He's never coveted anything so badly in all his long years. "Just...please be safe. Allow me to accompany you down to the beach for a stroll or swim. I don't want you getting hurt."

There's that look in his eyes again. You search for words to say, flustered. "W-Well...we must organise such occasions, since we'll have to work around your schedule. And you say you wield a catalyst?"

"We must, and I do. Precautions must be taken, yes?" He reaches forward and peels the coat from your shoulders, pointedly looking away from your torso. Out of embarrassment, you quickly cover yourself with your hands, backing up against the door. Neuvillette gives you an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry to be so abrupt. I will take this off your hands."

"Oh, I was going to wash it for you—but, thank you." You watch him drape the soaked coat over his forearm. "And Neuvillette, please don't overwork yourself. You've been looking quite fatigued lately."

His smile turns soft, fond. "I'll try. Goodnight, [Name]."

"Ah, goodnight." Your hand presses down on the door handle of your room. "Let me know the date of the banquet, if Furina tells you first."

"I will. Sleep well."

Neuvillette turns and makes his way down the hall, and you close your door shut behind you, leaning your head against it. You slide down and sit, back to it, head in your arms. You're uncaring of how damp you still are, how much you badly need a shower. You doubt sleep will grace you tonight.

This is bad. First, I said I'd tell him everything. Am I an idiot, or what? Now I actually have to tell him—and then leave in half a year. Then...that. What almost happened.

You heave a sigh and stand, heading for the bathroom. *I am skating on real thin ice here.*

You hate how the first man to ever treat you right is one you can't have. This can't last. You don't want to prove Furina right.

Am I holding back because of my pride? The thought makes you feel sick. Or is it about everything? Would it be so wrong to indulge a little?

You'd like to get rid of this agony. But would Neuvillette be willing?

No. I'll hurt him. And yourself.

Your entire life has been made up of ‘almosts’. You *almost* had the opportunity to go to the Akademiya. You *almost* got married to a man you thought would never raise a hand to you, only to *almost* kill you. You were *almost* happy.

Ah, what fun the gods must have with humans’ lives. Furina is assuredly having the time of her life puppeting the strings of you and Neuvillette’s current lives. Toying with your feelings, ripping your emotions apart.

The greatest opera of all time, she had said. Yes. Maybe this is an opera. The characters are confined to their set roles, never to stray from them, never to defy their ‘fate’.

Never to be free.

Chapter End Notes

so...I hate this chapter with every fibre of my being. I went completely off the rails, this chapter did not go according to the outline AT ALL, and so you guys didn't get the backstory. which kinda has come out ok for me as I wanted to push it forward in the first place, im very sorry y'all 💔

as a slowburn fanatic, this was extremely frustrating to write. 8k words of utter crap and yet here I am, with a splitting headache, posting it anyway. chocolate milk gives me way too much courage.

im pleased to see you guys still seem to enjoy this absolute HOT mess of a fic. remember, it's never too late to seek counselling <3

— les lignes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“My goodness, Neuvillette, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with such heavy eyebags.”

Neuvillette releases a sigh through his nose and continues perusing the documents before him, not even glancing up at the Duke of Meropide. “How fortunate am I to have a friend that is unfailing in pointing out the obvious.”

“In all seriousness, though, are you alright? You look like you haven’t slept a wink for a week.”

Wriothesley’s perceptiveness strikes again. The Chief Justice dips his quill into the ink jar and scribbles his signature on the dotted line of a paper upon some recently-overseen hearing. “I haven’t.”

“And you’re not your usual amiable self either. You know, if you’re worried about your wife, there’s a nice Inazuman restaurant that just opened downtown. The Tonkotsu Ramen is *divine*.”

“I don’t even know if she likes Inazuman food.” Neuvillette isn’t really in the mood to entertain Wriothesley’s company today, but the dark-haired man seems to be making no move to leave. The warden of the Fortress appears to be more than eager to give the Iudex some unsolicited love advice from the ‘love expert’—Wriothesley’s words, not his.

“*Everybody* likes Inazuman food. Oh, and did you hear that Lyney and Lynette’s holding a massive magic show in two weeks? Maybe you could take her along, have some fun.”

“Did you forget that this marriage is contractual? There isn’t any real reason to take her on dates, Wriothesley.”

The Duke’s eyes widen in incredulity at his words. “You don’t mean that. I can just tell that the very cause for your lack of sleep as of late is the very woman you don’t have ‘any real reason’ to take on a date. Do you think I’m stupid? You’re like an open book, Neuvillette.”

“The thing that *I* don’t understand is how adamant you all seem to be on making us into a happy, loving couple. Have you been colluding with Furina in secret?”

“She’s had a few cups of tea with me, but that’s besides the point. Isn’t the Madame bedridden with an awful cold right now? I bought some of my favourite tea up here so you and I could share some, but maybe you could take it and have it with her instead. What kind of husband would you be if you didn’t help nurse your ill wife back to health?”

That worries Neuvillette. “Do you think she’d be offended by my lack of checking-in and visits? I already had some chicken soup made for her yesterday, though.”

Wriothsesley's spirits lift once he sees he's starting to get through to the clueless man. "If *I* was your wife, I'd be insulted, whether contractually married or not. And *chicken soup*, Neuville? How cliché. I bet you told her maid to not let her know *you* requested it for her."

Neuville's subsequent silence was answer enough.

Wriothsesley rolls his eyes. "Whatever happened last week that caused this rift between you two is just silly. So, tell me—what *did* happen?"

"Uh..." Neuville's ears flush red at the memories that instantly flood him. "N-Nothing much."

"Did you two kiss or something? Oh, yeah, *real* scandalous. It's almost as if husbands and wives don't do that kind of thing!"

"We're husband and wife on *paper* and by *arrangement* only, Wriothsesley. It would be going against the contract to initiate any kind of intimate contact with each other like that. And no, we didn't 'kiss'. It was just..."

The Duke leans forward in anticipation for the Iudex's answer. "*Well?*"

"...Well, we ran into each other at the beach in the dead of night and talked."

"Did you two do the deed?"

"*No!*" The Chief Justice's entire face flares bright pink at Wriothsesley's innuendo.

"Goodness, Wriothsesley, how on earth did you come to *that* conclusion? Did you just come here today to bother me about such private matters?"

"Yeah. Anyway, you're blushing like a maiden on her wedding night. If you just 'talked', didn't 'kiss' and didn't get it on, then why are you so hesitant to divulge what *unseemly* act you both committed on the beach that night?"

"Alright, since you keep insisting—we *almost* did."

"As in, almost *kissed* or almost had se—"

"*Kissed!* Kissed—we almost kissed." Neuville waves a hand in front of face in defeat, trying to ease his embarrassment. He didn't want to think about how if they *weren't* interrupted, it probably would've escalated *way* further. *Archons, I sound like a right idiot.* He shoots the smug man before him a look. "What books have you been reading? You're making me seem like an airheaded teenage girl giggling about her first kiss to her gaggle of friends."

Wriothsesley looks almost offended. "The only things I have time to read are reports upon convicts and the management of the Fortress, *Your Honour*. And I'm sorry, but I really didn't know you were so sensitive about this matter. As if I *didn't* see how you carried her out of the tea party, all bridal style and everything. Looked way too real to just be an act. Isn't that just

so *interesting?*”

Neuvillette purses his lips, throwing Wriothesley a side-long glance. “You have just as wild of an imagination as Furina. I’ll take up your suggestion about the tea, though.”

“What about the magic show and restaurant? You could go dine at the restaurant *after* the show. Don’t you think she’d like that?”

Quiet, the Iudex stares blankly at the document before him, contemplating. *Would that be overstepping my bounds...? Oh, to hell with it—I’ve already done so too many times to count. What hurt is a small date going to do?*

“...Alright. Your counsel is sound, I suppose.”

“Of course it is. Oh, and do you know when the banquet will be?”

“...In two weeks’ time. What day is the show?”

“It’s on the Tuesday.”

“The banquet’s on the Friday. Are you going to attend?”

“Furina’s...*coerced* me into attending. I’m going to be stampeded by frenzied mothers desperate to marry off their equally crazed daughters again.”

“Careful, or—how do the youngsters call it these days?—she’ll ‘hitch’ you up with someone, too.”

Wriothesley gives him a look. “You sound like a ninety-year-old.”

Neuvillette side-eyes him in return. “And why do you think that is? I can never keep up with the ever-changing colloquialism of the kids these days.”

The Duke shakes his head in amusement, seeing he’s succeeded in his mission and thus can leave. “Alright, old man. Send my get-well wishes to your wife for me. And *don’t* tell her I sent the tea. It’s supposed to be all you.”

Neuvillette is too polite of a person to tell someone outright to get lost, so he opts to wave for the door. “Yes, yes, I get it, Wriothesley. I’m sure you’ve got plenty of things to attend to, or would you like me to assign you some documents to peruse for me?”

Wriothesley instantly gets the message and hurries for the door before Neuvillette can follow through with his threat. “I’ve got a date with the Pankration Ring, so sorry. Have fun with your wife!”

His office door quickly clicks shut. Neuvillette shakes his head and continues on with his work, perturbed.

Neuvillette debated with himself over whether he should deliver the tea to you anonymously, say Wriothesity heard of your sickness and sent it out of friendly well-wishes, or just man-up and go personally brew it for you.

Eventually, Neuvillette decided on the latter.

Now, he stands hovering outside of your bedroom door, hand raised to knock, but hesitance keeps him back. He's worried you're sleeping, and would disturb you—*and that's why you knock, idiot*—or, if you're awake, subject himself to even more embarrassment upon the remembrance of what almost happened a week ago. *This is a bad, bad idea.*

He almost leaps out of his skin when your voice calls out from behind the door, a slightly muffled: "Neuvillette, I know you're out there. Stop dawdling and come in."

Resigning himself to his fate, he clicks open the door and shuffles in, embarrassed. "My apologies. I was worried you were sleeping and that I would be disturbing you."

You haven't looked up from the book you're reading. He recognises the book title with a start—*The Soul of a Human*. The box of tea in his hand almost slips out of his grip at his shock. "Well, you were fretting over it outside my door for five minutes."

"I...apologise. Am I intruding?"

He understands why you would be grumpy—your voice *is* awfully stuffy from the cold, and your face is pale. And lo and behold—you're in the very same nightgown as you were that night. Neuvillette averts his gaze, ears burning. *Ugh, what's going on?*

"No, you're alright." You pick up a bookmark to your side and slide it into the book, closing it, giving him your full attention. You look up at him, before your stare falls to the item in his hold. "What's that you've got there?"

"Oh, uh..." He glances down at it, searching for the right words. *Wriothesity told me not to tell her he sent it...* Neuvillette finally manages out, "...I brought some tea to clear your head. Care for a cup?"

"How thoughtful of you!" An abrupt swell of pride at your thrilled affirmation envelops him, and confuses him. Ignoring it best he can, he *ahems* and turns for the coffee table. There's a rustle of bedsheets and covers and you're padding across the carpet for him. "Here, I'll go ask Anaïs for a fresh pot of tea."

"No, you must rest." Neuvillette doesn't even think before he's already put a hand upon your shoulder, stopping you in your tracks for the door. You turn to look up at him in surprise, and he quickly removes his hand. "Erm—I can go and ask her. Just relax. You need as much bed rest as you can get, yes?"

You stare at him silently, and he takes in your appearance. Hair unbrushed, up in a messy bun with wild strands of it flaring out, lips pale and chapped, nose red with your cold and your

eyes are sunken with fatigue. *I was a fool, staying out for as long as we did that night.* But, despite it all, seeing your complexion bare and sickly, he's rather struck with admiration.

He doesn't realise he's staring even more intensely than you when your quiet call of his name snaps him from his stupor. Blinking, Neuvillette takes a small step back. "Uh, sorry? Yes, I'll go brew it."

"That's not what I said—" But he's already rushing for the door, leaving your hand outstretched in a feeble motion to stop him. Now it's your turn to blink in bewilderment.

Man, he sure likes to stare. The bouts of chills you've been getting are traceless now, heat left in its place. You've never had someone look at you so *appreciatively*, and you're sure you look like a gremlin right now. Neuvillette was dead silent and just studying you intently, like he was looking at the moon.

You move to pull open a window, disliking how abruptly hot the room has gotten. *Should I do something about my appearance?* He's already seen you practically naked, and that thought makes you blush even more. Anxiously patting at your hair, you head for the bathroom and take a look at your reflection, almost recoiling in disgust. *I look ghastly!* You quickly run the tap water, splashing at your face, sucking in a breath at the chill of it. *Goodness, no wonder he ran out of here! I look like something out of a nightmare.*

You jump when the sound of your bedroom door clicking open reaches you and, with a rush of panic, you whirl around and shut the bathroom door. Soft footsteps pause, and Neuvillette's voice calls out, "[Name], are you alright?"

"Fine! Just—one moment, please." You hurriedly pat your face and hands dry, then moving to yank your hair tie from your bun, wincing at the sharp pull. *That's right, I haven't brushed my hair for a few days, I was so sick! It must be a rat's nest, and I probably have split ends now!* No matter how much you try to pry the tie from your hair, it won't budge, and it hurts like hell.

Okay, stop panicking. Why are you even panicking anyway? It's not like you can *help* looking so dreadful at present. *What are you trying to do—impress him?*

"Ow, ow, ow, *ow*," you softly whimper, bent over the sink awkwardly, gently trying to untangle the snag your hair tie has hit. You forget Neuvillette has exceptional hearing when three soft taps knock on the bathroom door.

"Are you sure you're alright? You sound like you're in pain." He catches you by surprise, and you jump, hand still in your hair, ripping some strands out. Involuntarily, you yelp, cursing under your breath, arms sore from the angle. You hear Neuvillette's polite, "I'm coming in" before the door clicks open.

Great. I wouldn't blame him if he started laughing. One look in the mirror and it's quite clear just how ridiculous you look right now. Hair flopping over your face, the end of it still tied together. Hot with humiliation, you rush to explain. "I...was trying to untie my hair, since it's been up like this for a few days—"

“Would you like some help?” Neuvillette shuts the door and approaches, hands reaching for your hair slowly, as if awaiting your permission. Seeing no other way, you nod feebly, your hair bouncing comically with the movement. “... Yes, please.”

Neuvillette begins to remove his gloves; biting down on the material covering his middle finger and sliding it off smoothly. The action is so minimal, so natural—but you can’t help but find the sight extremely attractive. His eyes meet yours, and he tilts his head slightly in silent inquiry to your ogling of him. You look away, fidgeting. *Things are starting to get out of hand.*

At least there isn’t a hint of amusement in his face—he doesn’t seem to find your current state funny at all. You were expecting him to tease you, maybe chuckle at your silly state, but he’s perfectly expressionless. As usual, you suppose. Although, he does seem to smile a lot at you. His eyes are soft, too.

“Where is it tangled?” His voice is quiet. Neuvillette’s fingers wind into your hair, quickly finding the hair tie and observing the state of it. You have to keep your head bowed awkwardly—but you suppose it’s nice that he’s significantly taller than you, so you don’t have to lean over too far. You reach up and lightly grab his hand, guiding it to where it is specifically twisted. “There. It’s knotted, I think.”

“Mm, it is.” His fingers are gentle, never tugging or pulling, just carefully working away at untying the knot in your hair as best he can. “It’s not so bad it has to be cut, though. You are fortunate.”

Relief fills you. “I’m glad. I suppose you have to deal with such incidents yourself with your hair?”

Neuvillette chuckles. *Gods, his laugh is so nice.* “From time to time, yes. But I take very good care of my hair. Wouldn’t it be so silly if the Chief Justice oversaw a trial with matted hair?”

“They wouldn’t let you in,” you laugh back, straightening slightly as your back muscles are beginning to ache. “Do you ever tie your hair up? Or try different hairstyles?”

“I...can’t say I have.” Neuvillette shakes his hand, some strands of your hair falling to the floor, before he continues untangling your hair again. “I think I prefer it out, with just the ends tied.”

“I see.” You’re the opposite—having your hair down all the time gets in your way. So, you opt to have it up in a hair claw or gathered on top of your head in a messy bun. You really can’t fathom how Neuvillette gets around so easily without sitting on his hair or getting it stuck in doors. But then again, you suppose, he *has* been wandering around like this for centuries, so he ought to have learned how to manage it by now.

But the little girl in you always wants to reach for his hair. It looks perfect to braid and brush to your heart’s content, but you wouldn’t dare ask. All you know is that it’s soft and very well-kept, considering its lucent shine and the handful of times he’s picked you up and you had to hold onto his neck.

Such a train of thought makes you curious—*what's his morning routine? Nightly routine? Does he put his hair up in a net before sleeping? How long does it take him to brush it out each morning? Doesn't it get bothersome at times? Has he ever had a haircut? And what are those blue things in his hair?*

You voice that last question. “Neuville, what are those pretty blue ornaments hanging down from your head?”

The movement of his hands in your hair freezes, and you immediately wish you could take your words back. *You and your big mouth, [Name]! Haven't you learned how to mind your business yet?* Biting down on the inside of your right cheek, you move to apologise. “I’m sorry if it was a personal question, they’re just so peculi—”

“They’re, uh...” His quiet reply silences you, and Neuville begins to untangle your hair again. “I can understand why you’re curious. I can’t explain it, but they’re just...well...”

“I dare say, they look like antennas,” you offer amiably, hoping to ease his clear awkwardness. “Or horns?” Then you giggle lightly. “Are you a dragon or something?”

Neuville swallows, beginning to sweat bullets. *You just hit the nail on the head, and I can't even tell you.* He really can’t think of an excuse for them, but he isn’t about to indulge you in his secret. “I’ve been around for a long time, [Name], so surely it can’t be strange to realise that I may be some kind of mystical creature.”

“You said you’re not a vishap, so *are* you a dragon?”

“...Not exactly. I can’t really tell you, to be frank.” Sometimes, he wishes you weren’t so perceptive. It’s a valuable trait, yes, and he admires you for it, but it’s uncomfortable when he witnesses you practically unravelling his own secrets he’s kept very down-low right before his very eyes. Your quiet, observant demeanour is worth its weight in gold, but he wasn’t aware that you had been silently studying him also.

Well, it makes sense, if you think about it. You’re both married, and live in the same residence. It would be more logical to consider it strange if you *weren't* curious about him—as he is you.

“Oh, I won’t pry, then.” It isn’t *that* factor that bothers him, he’s just a bit worried you’ll become suspicious, connect the dots—and it’s game over for him. If you haven’t already.

Silence reigns for a few moments, Neuville just gently unknitting your hair from the tie before finally pulling the band from your hair completely, holding it out to you. With the de-tanglement came a lot of pulled hairs, and a clump of some is still latched onto the tie. “There you are. Would you like to shower and wash your hair before joining me for tea?”

“Uh, yes, I will.” Embarrassment fills you again. You glance at yourself in the mirror, letting loose a humourless laugh. “I look ridiculous.”

Neuville surprises you by patting your head, much like he does to the Melusines he’s so fond of. He’s smiling at you with that same gentle smile, too. “You look cute, if anything.

There's no need to be embarrassed. Things like this happen."

You stare at him. *He thinks I look...cute?*

Neuvillette appears to be perturbed by his own words. His eyes widen a fraction. "Uh—that is, there's no need to put yourself down. Feel free to take your time."

You, again, don't get a chance to answer as he's already whirled around and shut the door behind him.

The bathroom door clicks open and you step out, towel wrapped around your head, hair up. You look and feel much more refreshed than before, face washed and moisturised. Neuvillette glances up from the newspaper he was reading and turns to you. "You look much better. I managed to keep the tea warm. Care for some?"

"Of course." You take a seat beside him, briefly shooting a glance towards the newspaper. And, as expected, the headlines are still going on about the announcement of Neuvillette's marriage. One of the most notable headlines, *Will There Be A Wedding?* lines the top of the front page, along with a long string of columns holding articles on the matter.

"The Steambird is just eating this up." You're somewhat amused. You've, effectively, thrown the entirety of Fontaine into chaos. There's a picture of you both at the tea party someone must've managed to snap just in time—Neuvillette's lips upon your cheek, your expression perfectly surprised—displayed across the front page. You pick up the paper and begin reading the first few sentences of the article aloud, "For once, Fontaine has been graced with something much more exciting and shocking than the latest murder mystery resolved at the trials—the very man known for overseeing such hearings, Iudex Neuvillette, has recently announced his marriage to a young woman, Madame [Name]." It's so ludicrous. Furina must be overjoyed.

You hear Neuvillette sigh from beside you, then the trickle of tea being poured sounds. "It gets better. The subtle slights thrown your way, in particular, are especially *riveting*." Sarcasm drips from his tone. "I don't recommend reading it. I've half a mind to send for them to halt publication of such an offensive article."

"No need, I was prepared for this." Society is fueled by vanity. Everyone likely expected Neuvillette, an unreachable, enigmatic figure with the face of an angel, to follow down a fairy-tale storyline. He would choose a woman equal to him in appearance, someone gorgeous and *loveable*, not someone who looks like every other person you pass by on the street. Not someone *normal*.

You've long grown a thick skin to scornful comments from those around you—commonly people you *don't even know*, and who don't know you—but it hurts a bit to be compared to the man next to you. So you opt to ask him what he thinks of your appearance.

"Well, Neuvillette, what is your opinion on me?" You brace yourself for the worst. But he's too nice a person to give it to you straight. Perhaps his hesitance to confide in you of his true, maybe even superficial, views on you is a factor that could wound you deeply.

“Opinion?” He echoes, surprised. Neuville sets down his cup upon the saucer in his hand with a soft *clink*, mauve eyes rather bemused. “...Could you be a little more specific?”

You have to choose your words carefully—you don’t want your deep-seated, pushed-down insecurities revealed, nor do you want to look like you’re fishing for compliments. For attention. You just want honesty, not flattery. “Erm...well, have you found that you would have rathered a more comely wife?”

“I will be perfectly frank.” Neuville places his cup and saucer on the coffee table before you both, before leaning back and facing you fully. “I am not someone who goes for what’s on the outside. However, in this sense and our situation, I never had a choice anyway—not that that’s turned out to be a bad thing.” He, too, seems to be having trouble wording it right. “What I mean to say is, I like *you*. Your personality. And it’s very easy to look past all those superficial, facile ideals of beauty and appeal once you understand the heart of who you’re dealing with.”

Yeah, he should’ve been a poet. You want to tease him, but now is not the time. You also didn’t expect his words to comfort you so much. Beauty is a double-edged sword, and so is being average. Then it hits you—*wait, could this be considered a...confession, of sorts?*

“So, you’re saying...you don’t care about my appearance? Like how the entire country and Furina does?”

“I never did. Why do you think I chose you? If I wanted a beautiful woman, I need only have taken my pick. I could send a letter to some nobleman with a particularly attractive young daughter and solved all his problems with marrying her off. But I didn’t. Although this situation is unromantic and unideal, that doesn’t mean I wanted it to be *unrealistic*.”

His words make you ponder. *He had options, but he selected me.* “...You could still say you had no choice, Neuville. The only reason I wound up here is because we danced and sent the ball rolling—a ball Furina herself put there, waiting for someone to kick.”

“Yes, you could. But you had a level head, could manage yourself under pressure, and you’re not the type to take much to heart. I needed someone *rational*, and it seemed like you were the only logical woman there.”

But it’s not like you were *different* from all the others. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, really. You give him a rather rueful smile. “You’ve misunderstood me once more, Neuville.”

“Sorry?” He almost flinches at your words. “Misunderstood you? How do you mean?”

“I am not some sensation. We were both in sticky situations and we both appeared before each other in the nick of time. And I didn’t see you talking to any other woman apart from Clorinde that night. You didn’t *try* to seek someone out—it’s like you just hoped the right person would come along. And they did.”

Neuville’s gaze drops, hurt flashing across his features. You feel pierced, like you just hurt

yourself too, but you push that guilt down. *This is not going how I intended it to.* Miscommunication strikes again. And it's the only thing you're both capable of, because you have some silly little piece of paper to stick to and blurring lines to stay behind.

It's frustrating, actually. You *want* to know more, but the contract says *no*. You've both come *so close* to breaking those rules you set for *yourselves*, only to pull away *just* in time. A chemistry you never asked for sputtered to life between you both, but it's something to be adamantly—*indefatigably*—avoided. Why is it such torture?

Torment like no other. *Ha*. You're talking as if you *know* what this is. But you don't. And you won't. All you know is that you *can't*.

"I..." Neuvillette seems to be at a loss for words. "I'm not sure what to say."

"It's alright." You lean forward and pat his hand, which is curled into a tightly clenched fist. "You *didn't* have a choice. This isn't your fault."

But it will be *your* fault if this continues on and becomes something it shouldn't. No matter how you strain to touch his face, you will be lost beneath the waves.

Chapter End Notes

SOSOSOSOSOOOO SORRY THIS TOOK SO LONG TO GET OUT, school has been WHOOPING my ass (and love and deepspace is taking up all the remaining gb in my brain) and I've hardly had time (and motivation ☺) to write ❤️❤️ BUT ANYWAYS!! better late than never <33

anyways HELLOOOOO AGAIN EVERYONE!! so nice to see you all once more <3 I hope you're healthy and well and don't have 4 massive cavities to be filled like I do!! 🥰

again, so sorry this took ten years. ive had other projects (love and deepspace) that I've been slaving away on and school assignments (that im procrastinating from) on my plate as well :(((BUT!! not to worry, for chapter 14 is here 🥰!!

HOPE YOU ENJOYED!! and recovered from the last one. cause WOW 🤯 I need to seek professional help ☺

— je ne peux pas !

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You are bored. Navia is out of town for the week, Furina has (thankfully) been leaving you alone as of late, you haven't had a reply back from your brother when you sent him a letter yesterday, and Neuvillette is avoiding you.

Neuvillette is avoiding you.

Did I really offend him that much? Should you apologise? *For telling the truth, when it needed to be said?* You had really just given him a reality check, told him where you lie—and where he thus lies, also.

You've always been rather harsh with your words. Maybe you could've gone about it more nicely, more gently. Because, if there's one thing you've found in the time you've known Neuvillette, is that he's rather a sensitive soul.

If he gets offended or hurt, he hides it away. And he likes to take strolls in the rain when he's sad, too. An empathetic man, you've caught that unmistakably glimmering sheen of tears hinting at that lash line of his.

The first time was when you were both in the garden at the ball that night, in the pouring rain. You thought his eyes were wet from the rain, and the tracks of droplets streaming down his cheeks were just rain water, but maybe you were mistaken.

You're watching him right now, seated at your window, overlooking the garden and harbour. It's raining buckets, as it has for the past three days since you both had that conversation, and he's holed himself away to sulk, probably. Now he's out in the open—his satiny, ivory hair limp with the rain. Neuvillette stands, form ramrod straight, hands behind his back, face turned to the sea, still.

You stare shamelessly, leg propped up on your window seat, arm resting on your upright knee, watching him. *I want to talk to him.* But he clearly wishes to be alone in the rain, without an umbrella, as expected. A man as resolute and introverted as him would likely be unappreciative of the company from the very cause of his present misery, say, and his entire demeanour right now just screams 'leave me alone'.

Neuvillette's head turns, and you now have a full view of his flawless side-profile. His bangs are plastered to his forehead and right cheek, eyes downcast. Then they flicker up, his form turns around a bit more, and thus, he's staring right at you.

You don't flinch away or pull the curtain in embarrassment at being caught. No. You stay seated, calm, ignoring how your stomach *did* drop in dread once you were sighted. You, frankly, don't know why you remained still. Even from this distance and height, you can feel his direct stare you're meeting without hesitation intensely. It's unwavering and vacant.

Spheroids of rain water stream down the window pane in opalescent beads, warping his pale image vaguely. It's strange how smoothly his form melds into the droplets' reflection. Similar to how he seemed to coalesce with the water when he emerged from it that night. It's how he seems to belong in the rain. And it's how his touch sears, yet soothes. Romantic, almost; but, above all, confounding. Something you long for, but something unprocurable.

Water drips, water escapes—but its effect is lasting. It lingers, as he does in the corner of your mind. Maybe that's why, when you finally turn from the window, you sense his stare remain, as the memory of the man forever will even after you leave for good.

Lately, Neuvillette has been making the first move. He never really took himself to be that kind of person. According to a book he once read on human psychology, when someone is in love, they will go above and beyond for the subject of their affections. *Is this what that is? Something you only see in operas and romance novels?*

That only confused the Hydro Sovereign further. And it was something Lady Furina, ever sharp-eyed, swiftly picked up on.

“I won't ever fall in love', you said,” she sing-songed, waltzing up to his desk. Neuvillette almost snapped off the head of his fountain pen with the pressure he subconsciously applied in irritation at her sudden, unbidden entrance. *Here we go.* “It's just an arrangement', you said. ‘There would be no strings attached', you said.”

He shot her a rather weak glare. “...Your point?”

Furina's jovial front suddenly faded, replaced with concern. “Neuvillette, you look drained. What exactly happened?”

The Chief Justice had no interest in accepting her pity. “Nothing of your concern. I just...”

“Hm.” Furina was tempted to open her mouth and express the triumph she held over how this stone statue of a man seemed to finally be feeling *something*. But, although with many faults, gloating is not one of them. Lady Furina is not a cruel girl. *It really seems as if everything's going to plan. Although, these two idiots are just in denial. Let's pull this one on him.*

“Wriothesley told me about the Inazuman restaurant and the magic show. It's on Tuesday, is it not? Well, that's in two days. So, Neuvillette—I order you to get off your chuff and go and invite her to attend with you right this instant.” Furina crossed her arms, ignoring the Iudex's stunned-into-silence expression. “*And* have dinner with her at the restaurant afterwards. Go on! Clear this misunderstanding or whatever between the two of you up immediately. It's *torture* to witness.”

“Lady Furina, it really isn't that simple—”

“Excuse, excuses—*honestly*, Neuvillette, surely you can do better than that?” She thus slammed a palm down flat upon his desk, rattling his ink jar he caught just in time and sending some of his papers flying. He was too bewildered to reprimand her for such carelessness. “In case your old age is *really* starting to get to you and you didn't hear me the

first time: I said, I *order* you. Hurry up! Sweep her off her feet and woo her with sushi. As they say—the quickest way to a woman’s heart is through her stomach.”

What a load of rot. Neuvillette opened his mouth to say that it’s probably too late to book tickets and procure suitable seats for the show—but, of course, Furina may have always been rather disorganised, but she’s never *unprepared*. He was silenced before the words were even spoken as she held up two VIP tickets in front of his face. “Don’t worry, I acquired tickets in advance. What did I just say, Neuvillette? Go and invite her out on a lovely little evening date *tout de suite!*”

And that’s how he ended up here, outside of your room *again*, like a lovesick fool, vying for his wife’s attention. He really wonders how idiotic he looks right now.

Neuvillette almost leaps out of his skin when Anaïs appears beside him, surprised at his own presence. “Monsieur? Are you looking for the Madame?”

“Uh—yes, I am. Is she inside?” He hastily clears his throat and collects himself. He thought it was you for a second—*that* would’ve been much more embarrassing.

“No, not at present. She told me she was heading out. Madame did not specify where.”

Instead of feeling relief like he expected to, disappointment washed over the man. Blinking in confusion at his own sentiments, Neuvillette gives a swift nod to the maid and turns.

“Alright, thank you, Anaïs.”

Is she visiting her brother? Best leave her to it, then. He does need time to find the right words on how to successfully invite you to attend with him. It’s been a few days since he spotted you staring down at him from your bedroom window, the silence between you two stretched and taut, and it irritates him like the intolerable itch of a mosquito bite. Something that you can get your mind off for a little while, before it always pops up again.

The last thing Neuvillette wants to appear as is clingy. But why won’t you ever make the first move? You’ve shown him what it’s like to *want* something so *intensely*, and as a man who has never asked for much—in fact, *anything*—in his life, why must it be now? Why must it be *someone*? Why must it be *someone* who will eventually, inevitably, slip from his hold?

He abruptly thinks back to how overwhelming the *desire* to have you was—how intensely he wanted to ravish you that night on the beach. Savour your mouth, ravish that figure of yours, make you ascend and see the stars in all their enrapturing beauty.

Neuvillette’s face flares, probably the shade of a tomato. Running a hand over his face is exasperation at his own untoward thoughts of his wife, he continues along the hall, turns the corner in the direction of his office, and slams into someone.

Someone a lot smaller than him. He sends the person almost flying—he didn’t realise he was practically marching, *storming*, down the hallway. In the nick of time, Neuvillette grasps the person’s upper arm and steadies them.

“Oh, my deepest apologies—” The Chief Justice’s words are cut short once he recognises just *who* he slammed into. “*Oh.*”

You’re clutching his forearm to keep your balance, pressed to him, forehead throbbing. “Goodness, Neuville, what’s got you in such a hurry?”

You don’t sound to be in the best of moods. *Is she alright?* His hands linger on your arms even as you pull away to create polite distance. *Dammit, I’m always reaching for her.*

Your forehead is red from where you smacked it on his chest. And, before he can think better of it—*it’s like I never think these days*—Neuville’s brushing gentle fingers across the bruise, sweeping your hair to the side, tilting your head up so he can observe the injury closely. He hardly notices your sharp intake of breath and reddening ears. All he’s thinking about is how your forehead probably needs ice.

“Hm. Shall we go get an ice pack for you?” Maybe he should put some distance between the both of you before he pins you against the wall. Have you always been this attractive? The press doesn’t know what they’re talking about, labelling you as ‘unalluring’. He’d love to while the night away with you in his arms.

Archons, what was that? Since when was he thinking like a hormonal, thoughtless teenager? Gods, he needs a glass of water to soothe his buzzing nerves. He’d love you to accompany him, but he’s a bit worried about what he’d do once you were both alone.

At times, he doesn’t even register what you’re saying, just zoning out and listening to the sound of your voice. Like now. But his rather foggy state of mind right now only just comprehends your assent to getting something to ease your bruised forehead.

It’s like it’s instinctual, how he wraps his arm around your shoulders, providing you support you don’t need. It’s just natural, leaning into you so comfortably, as if he’s been doing this for years. A pit forms and yawns within his stomach. To let the heart rule the head is a capricious, fatal mistake many before him have made, and the results commonly proved calamitous. Such impulsive behaviours were something Neuville initially believed were beyond him; something he was incapable of—and that’s the misconception. Just because you do not understand it, does not mean you lack the ability to enact it yourself. An enactment that keeps the noose around his neck, seconds away from the trapdoor at his feet giving way.

You do not pull from or reject his hold. It’s a criminally pleasant surprise Neuville is welcomed with, and the chasm gaping within him widens just a bit more. *Is this so wrong?* By Liyuean standards, yes: the Chief Justice is currently committing an unforgivable, inadmissible felony. The greatest of slights to the Geo Archon’s widespread, influential ideals. Such that has been adapted by many other societies—including the one he sits in that exalted chair and judges himself.

You both enter the kitchen, the area usually so bustling, now devoid of fellow human life as the staff is presently on break. They would not be back for about another hour, leaving the pair plenty of time to do as required for the Madame’s rather sore forehead.

Neuville sits you down upon a stool he pulls up for you and rushes over for the freezer room, where the Cryo-infused room holds all necessary for refrigeration, preservation of meats and other perishables, and, of course, ice packs. He selects a sizable one and wraps it in a kitchen cloth, before approaching you once more.

He thought you'd protest; make a fuss and insist you're *fine*—but, to his (again) pleasant surprise, you sit there quietly, eyes on him as he makes his way over, the coldness of the ice pack seeping through the cloth and into his palm. Neuville finds himself rather perturbed by the intensity of your gaze.

“Here you are.” He presses it to your forehead. “It must hurt, no?”

“Not really.” You haven't taken your eyes off him once in the duration of him approaching you and placing the ice pack to your head. Once you are holding the frosty item to yourself securely, he takes a step back, placing respectful distance between the two of you. Neuville flicks his stare away, while you continue in that rather soft tone of yours. “Although, you *do* have a rather hard chest. Who knew you had such a physique beneath those ornate robes of yours?”

Is she...flirting? Such an incomprehensible facet of humanity for him, but one that nonetheless leaves his ears flushing. The Iudex preoccupies himself with getting a glass of water. “...I haven't the faintest idea what you mean.”

“Neuville, you have the figure of a god.” You tilt your head at him, something he doesn't appear to notice. “And you're such a homebody. Where do you get the time? Apart from going for the odd swim, of course. I do believe I've asked this question many times before, but you never gave me a definitive answer.”

Neuville gulps down the water, relishing the coolness of it advancing throughout his body. The room's getting rather hot. He fidgets with his collar, untightening it slightly. *Why is such a question getting me so flustered?* Perhaps it's the memories your words bring with them. You're evidently referring to a night the both of you most *certainly* remember. Neuville taps the corner of his mouth with a handkerchief somewhat anxiously, placing the glass down upon the counter with an almost-too-loud *clink*. “I just...well, when I can, I do a wee bit of fitness. It's...optimal for relieving stress.”

““A wee bit’?” The stool creaks and your shoes tap against the tiled floor as you stand, sidling up to him, hip upon the bench's steel corner. *What on earth's gotten into her* now? It's just going to send him down the rabbit hole again. Maybe this time, he'll do what he's been wanting to since that one eventful night and regret it all over again. The glass still within his hold could splinter at any given moment due to the tightening grip he has on it; clawing at his self-control to ground himself. Neuville watches your every move warily. Your expression remains rather blank, but your unwavering stare states otherwise. He gulps. “You must have a lot of free time on your hands, then. A lot more than you let on. Could *now* be such an example, perhaps?”

“I—” His words are cut off by his own sharp inhale when your right hand plants itself on his forearm. *Oh, no...* “Madame, I would advise you...” Neuville strives to sound

authoritative, but he can't manage the tone. It's embarrassing, how much his skin burns as if flames licked at it instead of his wife's mere hand. He swallows heavier this time. "Please..."

"What's wrong, Chief Justice?" *She's so confusing!* One moment you're so off-putting, so enforcing of the contract's regulations, so adamantly avoidant of his company—and then you're doing *this*, sending mixed signals and playing around with his feelings again!

I need to do something about this. Something like redrawing the line. Even if it rips that hole in him open wider some more.

Your low hum is enough of a trigger—in a flash, you're pinned against the counter, large and warm gloved hands clutching your hips, his left knee between your legs, torso pressed to his. It leaves you gasping, your own hands splayed out upon his chest, faces much too near. Taken off guard, your mind is left to abruptly rewind back to the *last* time you were both in this close and *amatory* of a pose—not in the bathroom when he kindly untangled your hair for you, but when you both stood alone on the beach, your chin tipped up towards his by the man's gentle fingers. And *now*, he doesn't look so impressed.

"My dearest wife," he murmurs lowly, breath fanning across your mouth. "Please do not attempt to dupe me so. It's quite misleading."

"*Dupe?*" You repeat, beginning to return to your senses, but you're still nonetheless startled. *Flustered.* "And *misleading?* Dearest *husband*, please do elaborate."

A familiar brush of fingers to your cheek—something he's fond of doing, it appears, considering how many times he's touched you so. So gentle, but his sudden grip to your chin is not so tender. Now, it holds inflections of exasperation—of *frustration*. Mauve, slitted eyes glint with a storm. His brow has a pinch. "You cannot act so distant and then so intimate whenever you like. I am not some whimsy of yours to toy with when it suits you."

That makes you frown, your feelings pierced. "Now you've confused *me*. Who said I'm toying with you? I'm trying to *get* somewhere here."

"*Somewhere?*" It's his turn to repeat your own previous words. Neuville tilts his head, and it's in a scarily fitting position for him to lean forward and...*what did you say?*

The impact of your phrasing hits you, and you attempt to flinch back, but you're held securely in place against the counter and your husband. He ceases your squirming with his forbidding hold. *Dammit! You fool of a woman!* Despite his clamped-down hold upon you, you keep wiggling to get away, panic seizing you. "I...! That is—" Neuville's hold is too resistant, it's like trying to wriggle free of a vice. He keeps staring at you, his previous amenity traceless. "If you let me *go*, I'll explain—"

"Oh, yes, you will, and then you'll lie—and, well, [Name]..." You've never seen this side of him before. It's frightening you. *I've really blown it this time, haven't I?* His hand holds your chin firmly in place, grip powerful, yet not painful; his expression is much more excruciating than that. This is the first time you've witnessed Neuville's anger directed at *you*. "...As one who is not predisposed to lying, I therefore deeply dislike it when others do so without so much as a *thought* for those around them. I cannot stand manipulators."

Oh gods, oh gods. You know he'd never harm you in such a way, but you're getting *recollections*. *Not now! Not. Now! Please, not now!* Too close. If you act up now, it'll just look like you're pulling at *more* strings to bend him to your will—something you've never intended to do, and you've effectively hurt yourself *and* Neuville by making him even *think* you're like that—and considering his present expression and mood, it won't sail well. Your breathing is becoming increasingly erratic, but the Iudex doesn't appear to take notice. "So, if you will, *do* tell me your true intentions, lest *I* do something the contract strictly outlines not to do."

You pause, breathless. "...What?"

"You're too tempting." His hand now drops down to rest against the curve of your waist, grip tight. Neuville's other hand leans against the counter's edge. "And you're frustrating. Is it so wrong to indulge a little?"

Oh... Maybe this is a rerun of the night at the beach. Maybe this time, the sexual tension will get too much. Maybe he's right—it's clear the desire is mutual. You're both toeing the line. Will it turn out fine? Or will this be a turning point—*breaking* point in your relationship?

It won't be contractual anymore. That's the daunting reality. It'll be harder for you both to give your final goodbyes to each other when the contract timeline runs out. Coming down from the high will be a ruinous, catastrophic crash. And to think you'll be proving Furina *right*—your pride won't have any of that.

Is it so wrong to indulge a little? Were his soft words, and you're wondering that too. You've been pondering—*overthinking*—that for weeks. You quite agree with him—it's so *frustrating*. Why is everything you want always out of reach? *Is it so wrong to be happy?*

"I just..." You begin, placing your hand on the dip from his shoulder to his collarbone, running a fingernail over the button on his shirt just *waiting* to be popped. Your blood thumps in your ears. "I didn't mean to offend you..."

"No." Neuville's hand is back to tipping your chin upwards again. Long lashes frame fervid violet hues that rove over your face intensely. They seem to linger on your mouth. "But you confuse me. How can you push me away and pull me back so thoughtlessly, never once considering my feelings?"

"What are you *on* about, Neuville?" It seems to him as if you're *just not getting it*—or, maybe more plausibly, you don't *want to*. Must he spell it out? Must he dive into the uncharted waters that lay murkily calm before him? Must he risk it all?

"You cannot create another misunderstanding between us and then go on to pretend as if nothing happened. How am I supposed to feel?" His eyes convey such disheartenment and implorent, your heart is left to drop. *Oh. Yes, he's owed an apology for how I spoke to him a few days ago. How am I supposed to put this, though?*

"I'm sorry, Neuville, I just—" *Don't try to make excuses now.* It'd just incriminate yourself further. And the one thing you've found you fear the most of late is him turning his back on

you. Could you handle the rest of your life with more regrets? Would you be able to live out the remainder of your days with the torment of *what could've been*?

With those thoughts, you quieten, wracking your brain for the right words. “I’m just confused—of course, that’s no excuse for hurting you, but, I...” This is getting increasingly difficult, what with his proximity and touch and unyielding stare. He’s silent, waiting for you to continue, showing no signs of stepping back and letting you breathe normally once more. You find you can’t reciprocate his gaze. Fidgeting with his outer robe’s collar, you finally muster the words and courage to go on. “Do you understand me when I say I *want* to grow closer to you, but I just *can’t*?”

Neuvillette remains quiet, and it shoots panic into you. “Surely you understand! I mean, there’s the *contract* to worry about, then there’s making sure we don’t prove Furina *right*, and *then* there’s my past that just—ugh! I know I haven’t explained everything in detail, but—I’m confused! Should we, or should we *not*? It’s like you said—is it so wrong to just indulge a *little*?”

Again, he prolongs his silence, just staring at you, grip nowhere near as tight anymore. And then, he releases you. He steps back; he puts distance between you both. *Is this the feeling of messing everything up bad*? It’s a wash of dread submerging you, an anchor weighed to your ankle, wrenching you down. Neuvillette’s hands drop limply to his side, much like how you feel inwardly right now, and he opens his mouth once more to speak. You brace yourself.

“...Join me for dinner,” he says after a moment of horrid, heavy, permeating silence. “I have tickets to Lyney and Lynette’s next magic show, and there’s a new Inazuman restaurant that recently opened nearby. Let’s go on a date.”

He wants to try. You want to kiss him breathless right now. *He wants to try!* He wants to risk it, as you do. He wants to *try with you*. The relief you feel almost outweighs the joy sprouting back up within you.

“Sure.” You messed up so badly, you failed miserably at trying to take it a step further, but Neuvillette, ever the forgiving, kind man, pushes that aside and offers you a hand. He’s wholehearted. That’s what gives you courage. “Let’s have dinner together.”

Chapter End Notes

here u guys go. lucky for y'all, all of your requests for things to get moving w these two bozos was in the initial plan for this chapter ☆☆ am I not amazing? (pls note the sarcasm)
<3

ANYWAYS! I served, but did not eat. sorry for yet another disappointing meal y'all, a feast will be coming SOON !! 🍕🙏

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